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(on the cover) Eva Hesse, *Contingent* (1969), cheese-cloth, latex, and fiberglass, overall 138" x 248" x 43". National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1973. Courtesy the Estate of Eva Hesse, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

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For this issue we present articles on several women artists who have been on the margins of the feminist art movement or who chose not to be identified with feminism. Eva Hesse was claimed by feminists of the 1970s, although she did not respond to feminist issues and died before the women's art movement really commenced. Denise Birkhofer presents a new topic for the Hesse discourse by suggesting "striking similarities" with the Brazilian artist Miriam Schendel, who like Hesse was German-born and escaped Nazi aggression. Even though Hesse and Schendel never met, their works have parallel approaches to seriality, the use of hanging elements, and a penchant for fragile, ephemeral materials. In juxtaposing their works, Birkhofer finds similar "notions of the body, the void, and language."

Bett Schumacher titles her article on Helen Frankenthaler "The Woman Problem." Since the 1960s, as critics were writing of her palette as "seductive and feminine," Frankenthaler has frequently separated herself from any consideration as a feminist, declaring that her identity as a woman was "superficial," and a "side issue" to any discussion of her work. Schumacher argues that, "attempting to eradicate gender is still engaging it, and her protests notwithstanding, being a woman mattered to Frankenthaler's art."

Printmaker Lynne Allen is not a feminist although she admits to benefitting from the feminist movement. Her experiences during travels to the Soviet Union as a young artist influenced her representations of "the disadvantaged and marginalized." Kit Smyth Basquin writes about Allen's journey as an artist and a teacher (she now heads Boston University's school of visual arts). Social and political injustices, particularly as experienced by her Native American forebears, are a central theme in Allen's art.

In her article on Nikki de Saint-Phalle, Catherine Dossin focuses on claiming this artist for feminism, based on her "redeeming mission to create artworks for and about women and their real, mostly painful experiences." Dossin outlines underlying cultural differences between French and American feminists as contributing to Saint-Phalle's own ambivalence, and suggests that her associations with French *Nouveau Réalisme* and Neo-Dadaism separated her from an identification with women artists, ultimately affecting her full acknowledgement in feminist literature.

The connection between Medieval abbess Hildegard of Bingen and photographer Francesca Woodman is outright speculation. In the exercise of pairing works from the twelfth century with Woodman's photographs of the 1970s, created before her untimely death at age 23, Marian Bleeke invokes thought-provoking visual responses to these images. She offers interesting comparisons regarding visualizations of the relationships to agency, space, and womanhood of these two women separated by 800 years.

Among the book review subjects are three American modernists. A large, comprehensive catalogue is the first to detail the life and work of Mercedes Matter. A student (and lover) of Hans Hofmann, Matter was a founding member of American Abstract Artists, and founder of the New York Studio School. Reviewer Barbara Wolanin describes her paintings as "energy-filled" and "pulsating." To reviewer Pamela Simpson, the subject of *Alice Neel: Painted Truths* was an artist "who constantly had to contend with being out of the mainstream. She was a woman when art was dominated by men, a portraitist when others had pronounced the whole genre dead, a realist/expressionist when art was abstract." Painter Grace Hartigan,

too, defied the mainstream, often struggling with her choices during a formative period in her professional and creative life when she wrote her newly published journals. Reviewer Robin Rice witnessed her movement, "hesitantly but courageously, from non-objective abstraction toward abstracted expressive representation."

There is much yet to discover in the "largely untapped" papers and archives of Ana Mendieta, and *Unseen Mendieta* includes 200 previously unpublished images of and by the artist. Reviewer Joanna Roche writes that this expanded visual documentation represents "a fulfillment of the artist's wish to be recognized as a 'conscious collaborator with nature.'"

The first of three books on German artists, "a straightforward monograph in English" of Paula Modersohn-Becker, is meant to bring greater recognition to this artist's work, writes reviewer Christiane Hertel. One of two volumes on the Bauhaus focuses on twenty women—representing the many who were students and teachers there. Details of their lives and works reveal why they "sought out the potential of the Bauhaus," and how "many of the women suffered the same outcomes as their male colleagues, with their work censored and deemed 'degenerate' by the National Socialists," writes reviewer Rachel Epp Buller. The second book contains the letters and diary notes of Bauhaus weaving workshop "meister" Gunta Stölzl, most presented in English for the first time. "The material...is wonderful in opening up a lost world," writes reviewer Anja Baumhoff, whose discussion of the book's subtitle, *Bauhaus Meister*, explains the women's struggle for equality with their male counterparts.

A book on "dangerous women" looks at images of seductive muses and femmes fatales, providing "a revealing analysis of female iconography through the ages." What struck reviewer Megan Brandow-Faller as most dangerous, however, was its "perpetuation of stereotypes of women as objects, rather than creators, of art." An interesting correlative is found in *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, whose subject is representations of motherhood in art. Reviewer Patricia Briggs notes that "patriarchal society's disdain for women, especially mothers, has long been coupled with a sentimental (and inaccurate) image of motherhood, which in turn has led to the scholarly neglect of this topic, even among feminist scholars."

The final subjects are two meticulous recorders—one of the built world, the other of the natural world. Beginning in the late 1800s, Frances Benjamin Johnston photographed presidents and cultural leaders in her native Washington, D.C. In the next century she turned to photographing architecture, and according to reviewer Robin Rice left a rich and remarkable record of public and private architecture, especially of the American South. Two centuries earlier, Maria Sybilla Merian and her daughters traveled as far as Surinam to make scientific studies of flowers and insects. Reviewer Martha Moffitt Peacock notes that besides these images, which fill a recent exhibition catalogue, are "descriptions of Merian's painstakingly detailed stylistic development" and an investigation of "the business aspects of her career and how she and her daughters...established a successful position for themselves within these male domains."

We are pleased to announce that in February 2011, Joan Marter is being honored by the Women's Caucus for Art with their lifetime achievement award for her many accomplishments, most recently as editor-in-chief of *The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art*.

Joan Marter and Margaret Barlow, co-editors

EVA HESSE AND MIRA SCHENDEL

VOIDING THE BODY — EMBODYING THE VOID

By Denise Birkhofer



Fig. 1. Mira Schendel, *Trenzinho (Little Train)* (c. 1965), sheets of Japanese paper suspended on nylon line, dimensions variable. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Artists Eva Hesse and Mira Schendel share many striking similarities in their professional and personal lives. Both women were born in Europe, underwent complicated flights from Nazism, and had international upbringings before finally settling in the Americas: Hesse in the United States in 1939 and Schendel in Brazil ten years later.¹ Although Eva Hesse (1936-70) was nearly a generation younger than Mira Schendel (1919-88), the two artists embarked on their careers around the same time, and both attained their artistic stride and made their best-known works in the 1960s. Many of the works they produced in this decade are formally parallel to each other, employing devices such as hanging, seriality, transparency, fragility, and ephemerality. Each artist explored these similar concepts in vastly different milieus on separate continents,² likely remaining completely unaware of the other's work during this period.³ Yet, when considering their works together, parallel themes arise, specifically the ideas of the body and the void.

Juxtaposing their works can provide valuable insights into the approaches of Hesse and Schendel by introducing an entirely new discourse into each artist's literature. Such juxtapositions are especially poignant when approaching artists active in Latin America such as Schendel, as the relative youth of the field of Latin American art history tends to result in lighter historiographies. The combination of artists' work from different backgrounds instantly opens up new layers of meaning that have not otherwise had time to incubate within a highly developed academic exchange.

A similar approach was recently taken with the placement of Schendel's work alongside that of Argentine artist Leon Ferrari in the 2009 "Tangled Alphabets" exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Because of the lack of any significant artistic correspondence between Schendel and Ferrari, "Tangled Alphabets" ran the risk of being dismissed as a mere "juxtaposition show." In fact, in her review of the exhibition in *The New York Times*, Roberta Smith criticized the organizers for



Fig. 2. Eva Hesse, *Contingent* (1969), cheesecloth, latex, and fiberglass, overall 138" x 248" x 43". National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1973. Courtesy the Estate of Eva Hesse, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

trying to cram two retrospectives into a gallery space usually meant for one—a tactic which she identifies as symptomatic of MoMA's attempts to widen its own self-constructed, narrowly Euro-American view of twentieth-century art.⁴ MoMA's "two-for-one" approach is understandable, however, given the aforementioned possibilities for instantaneously expanding the discourse on art with limited baggage from critics and historians. With this in mind, a consideration of Schendel alongside an artist like Hesse, who does in fact come complete with a loaded scholarly historiography, can be fruitful in revealing insights into Schendel's work. In particular, the notion of the corporeal—a theme thoroughly explored in Hesse's bibliography—finds new life in the context of Schendel's oeuvre. By the same token, themes usually applied to Schendel's work, such as language and the void, will prove applicable to that of Hesse.

The comparison is an apt one, as new viewers of Schendel's work often find Hesse to be the most readily available referent. Smith demonstrates this in her review by correlating Schendel's sculptural forms made of rice paper to Hesse's "resonant fusion of organic and geometric."⁵ Here, Smith is referring to Schendel's well-known series of *Droguinhas* (*Little Nothings*) (1966; Pl. 1), masses of twisted and knotted Japanese paper that can be suspended from the ceiling or piled casually on the floor. The state of entropy suggested by these objects provokes a comparison with certain of Hesse's pieces like the untitled rope installation from 1970 (Pl. 2), which similarly relies on hanging and gravitational pull to determine its own form.⁶ The viewer of Schendel's *Trenzinho* (*Little Train*) (1965; Pl. 3 and Fig. 1) might also call to mind a work like Hesse's

Contingent (1969; front cover and Fig. 2) in their shared sense of suspended precariousness, as Schendel's accumulation of blank sheets of rice paper flutter slightly in a similar manner to that of Hesse's fiberglass and latex panels.

More is at play here, however, than a mere morphological affinity, as notions of the body, the void, and language pervade the oeuvre of both artists. Analogies with the corporeal have been the most common points of entry in Hesse scholarship since its inception. Despite Hesse's often ambivalent position about the role of the body in her works, critics continuously have perceived organic dimensions in her forms and materials. The panels of cheesecloth covered in layers of latex and fiberglass in *Contingent*, for example, evoke the translucent fleshiness of human skin, while the various coils of the rope piece suggest disembodied sinews or entrails. An early proponent of the body metaphor in Hesse's work was the critic Lucy Lippard, who included Hesse in her 1966 exhibition "Eccentric Abstraction" at New York's Fischbach Gallery. For Lippard, the artists included in this group show offered an alternative to industrial, "dead-set Minimalism," by reintroducing a tactile, sensual, and erotic dimension into their

production.⁷ When Lippard decided to include Hesse in the show, she likely had in mind her recent works such as the 1965 relief *Ringaround Arosie* (Fig. 3), whose pink coloring and concentric, protruding forms have obvious (yet ambiguous) erotic connotations.⁸ Contrary to Lippard's expectations, Hesse instead contributed *Metronomic Irregularity II* (1966), which was made of square panels connected by tangled wires, departing from the organic metaphors of the earlier reliefs or the phallic, sausage-like forms of a work like *Several* (1965).

Despite the artist's seeming shift away from literal allusions to the body, Lippard continued to develop her view of Hesse's forms in her 1976 monograph on the artist in terms of a humorous and threatening eroticism. While not consciously anthropomorphizing, Hesse's work evoked the Freudian concept of the body-ego, in which the viewer's body is felt to be identified with, or related to, the abstract form in a visceral way.⁹ Many subsequent scholars and critics have continued to construct complicated body theories around Hesse's works. Rosalind Krauss considered Hesse's objects to be "desiring machines," relating them to Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's concept of the "Anti-Oedipus," in which the "threatened paranoid body" becomes deterritorialized and amorphous: a "body without organs."¹⁰ For his part, James Meyer has written of a "despecification of the body," where the various body parts suggested by Hesse's forms are severed from their recognizable context, becoming part-objects that fail to form an intact whole.¹¹ Most recently, both Briony Fer and Yve-Alain Bois have stressed a certain non-literal bodily presence in Hesse's works: for Bois, this "tenuous bodilyness" is most akin to a recently detached toenail, something once

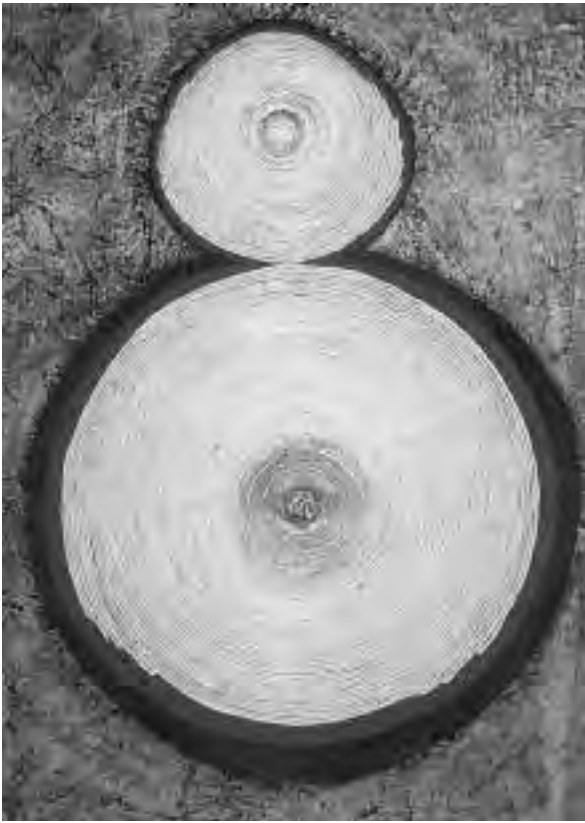


Fig. 3. Eva Hesse, *Ringaround Arosie* (1965), pencil, acetone, varnish, enamel paint, ink, and cloth-covered electrical wire on papier-mâché and Masonite, 26 3/8" x 16 1/2" x 4 1/2". Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy the Estate of Eva Hesse, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

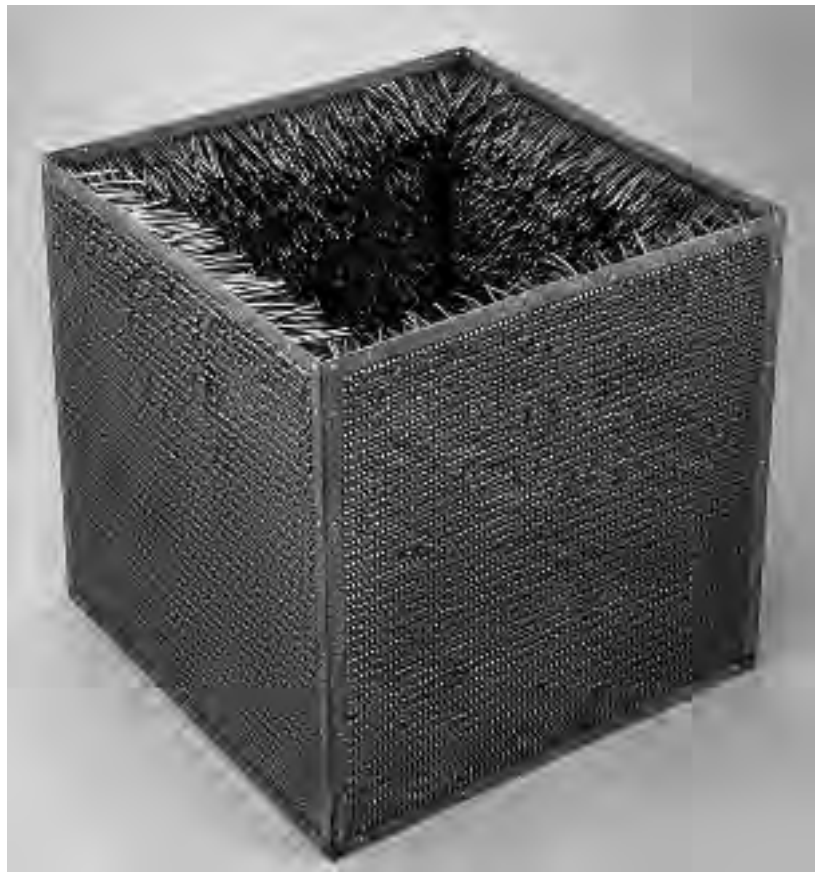


Fig. 4. Eva Hesse, *Accession II* (1967), galvanized steel and rubber tubing, 30 3/4" x 30 3/4" x 30 3/4". Detroit Institute of Arts. Courtesy the Estate of Eva Hesse, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

part of the body and retaining something of its aura, while Fer stresses not the *likeness* of Hesse's surfaces to the body, but how they are *unlike* the body.¹²

It is precisely this familiar yet strange quality that provokes a sense of the uncanny in the viewer, the combination of attraction and repulsion as elicited by the abject and the grotesque.¹³ This condition of attraction and repulsion is exemplified in a work like *Accession II* (1967; Fig. 4), a perforated steel box whose interior is lined with countless tiny rubber tubes, which is often noted for resembling a hairy orifice and for its punning on the female sexual organs. While the industrial steel rejects comparison with the human body, the interior is so inviting that it even provoked a spectator's attempts to climb inside the piece at an early showing. In addition to their attractive/repulsive qualities, some of Hesse's works, especially those constructed out of latex—an unstable medium which caused works like *Contingent* to yellow, become brittle, and deteriorate over time—also evoke the grotesque. This deterioration is analogous to the decay suffered by the human body as it ages, an element which has prompted the notion that the ephemerality of Hesse's works was connected to her own approaching mortality.¹⁴ This assumption again has been made regardless of the position of Hesse herself, who was ambivalent about the conservation and longevity issues of her pieces: although aware of the problems posed by the latex, she

found its unstable material properties intriguing but was not sure how she felt about its impermanence.¹⁵ Despite the fact that she was working on these latex pieces during the height of her illness, the idea that Hesse was projecting her own immanent mortality onto her works is symptomatic of a wider problematic tendency to romanticize the artist's biography that is best avoided.

In addition to the numerous corporeal metaphors advanced by critics, the body is reintroduced to the works in a secondary way due to their phenomenological aspects. Similar to that of other Minimalist and Post-Minimalist artists operating at the time, Hesse's work can be related to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas on phenomenology as put forward in his *Phenomenology of Perception* of 1945, which stressed the active role of the human body in perceiving the world. Artists took up the idea of the eye as part of a body that is situated in relation to its wider physical environment by creating complex works that invited the spectator's movement around them. Because the perception of a work is made infinitely changeable as the observer moves around it, an element of temporality is introduced into the act of viewing. Hesse's rope piece demonstrates this concept by refusing to look the same from any two angles; *Contingent*, too, promotes active viewing by its suspension in space, requiring the viewer to move around the work to take in the various configurations of the panels in



Fig. 5. Mira Schendel, *Objeto Gráfico* (Graphic Object) (1968-71), oil, typed script and letterset on rice paper mounted between sheets of transparent acrylic, 20" x 20". Ada Schendel Collection.

relation to one another. Furthermore, due to the lightness of the hanging membranes, they are disturbed by the movement of the viewer in a similar way as is Schendel's *Trenzinho*, which fluctuates due to shifting air currents and even the spectator's breath, giving the impression that the work is itself a breathing organism.

A phenomenological reading is central to Schendel's practice as well as to Hesse's, both in the *Trenzinho* and even more overtly in her late 1960s series of *Objetos Gráficos* (Graphic Objects) (Fig. 5), consisting of sheets of rice paper covered in lettering, sandwiched between two panels of suspended clear acrylic. By moving the objects away from the wall and hanging them in the center of the room, Schendel encouraged the viewer to move around the works to experience them from all angles. This practice finds parallels in works like the Spatial Reliefs of her Brazilian contemporary Hélio Oiticica, which also partake of a phenomenological dialogue in giving three-dimensional form to color in space. This experiential aspect is even more apparent in his *Núcleos*, which become enterable environments. Likewise, the *Objetos Gráficos* approach the environmental as displayed in the 1968 Venice Biennale (Fig. 6). Here, the works were installed in overlapping arrangements that allowed them to be viewed through one another, also permitting glimpses of passing spectators and the surrounding environment, both inside the gallery as well as from the outdoors via the nearby wall of windows.¹⁶ The transparency of the acrylic plates denies the frontality of the works on paper within each *Objeto Gráfico*. In addition, the encased sheets of paper are oriented in both directions and are so thin that writing is visible in reverse through their translucent surfaces, negating a front/back opposition. The



Fig. 6. Mira Schendel, *Objetos Gráficos* (Graphic Objects) (1968) installation at 1968 Venice Biennale. © Max Schendel.

ability of the viewer to read the lettering from the back and the front—and both simultaneously—denies the two-dimensionality of the word and lends it a new corporeality: letters are no longer flat elements applied to a surface, but exist in three-dimensional space. According to Luis Pérez-Oramas, the *Objetos Gráficos* are part of Schendel's application of a thickness to language: in essence, she gives it a body.¹⁷ While for Hesse the body is suggested through visual affinities with anthropomorphic forms, for Schendel notions of the corporeal emerge from her concern with the physicality of language. This focus on the physical qualities of language is demonstrated in the *Objetos Gráficos* through their recurrent inclusion of repetitions of the letter "A," which has ties to Brazilian Concrete poetry in the use of nonsensical arrangements of letters to create visual patterns rather than to convey intelligible meaning. These repetitions of the letter "A" also serve to evoke onomatopoeic utterances from human mouths, as well as the concept of origins in said letter's position as the inaugural character of the alphabet.

Language, as discussed most effectively by Pérez-Oramas in his essay for "Tangled Alphabets," forms the backbone of Schendel's body of work. Her exploration of language was ongoing, stemming from her early forays into poetry and philosophy and pervading her work both literally (in the *Objetos Gráficos*) and figuratively (in the *Droguinhas*, as discussed below). In the *Objetos Gráficos*, Schendel excerpts passages from diverse sources, including philosophy, poetry, and popular song lyrics. Language similarly becomes the primary content for her series of *Monotípias* (Monotypes), produced throughout the 1960s. Schendel produced dozens of these unique works by inking a glass plate with oil over which talcum powder was sprinkled; on top was placed a sheet of thin rice paper onto which the oil was transferred through the use of the artist's fingernail or other small tool. In addition to subtle lines and other abstract shapes, writing is a major component of this

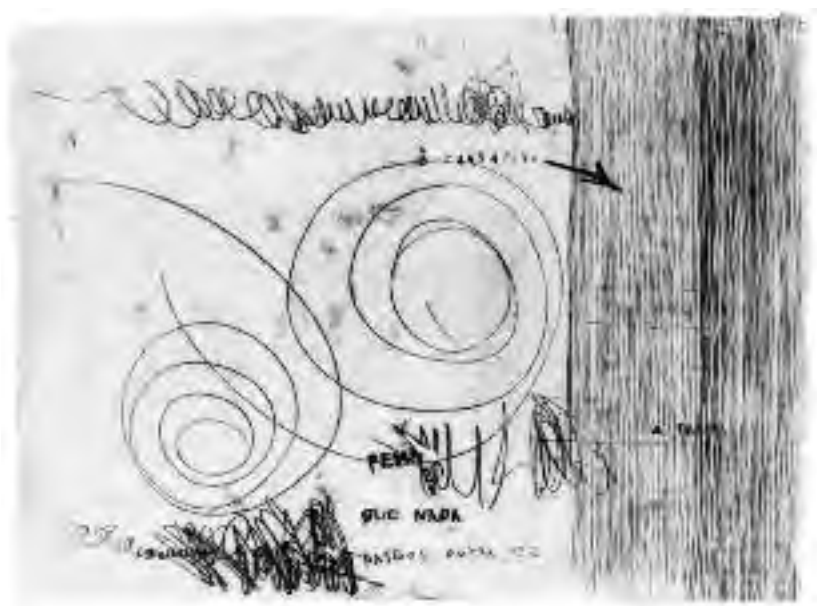


Fig. 7. Mira Schendel, *A trama (A Fabric Net)* (1960s), oil transfer drawing on Japanese paper, 17 3/4 x 24 1/2". Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 8. Eva Hesse, *Untitled* (1962), pencil on paper, 8 7/8" x 11 3/8". Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College. Courtesy the Estate of Eva Hesse, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

series. One such work known as *A trama (A fabric net)* (Fig. 7) differs from the other monotypes in terms of its horizontal format and possession of a title, but it incorporates many typical components of the series, including fragments of words and phrases that coexist with abstract spirals and symbols, configurations of lines, and indecipherable scribbles.

Hesse, too, maintained a longtime interest in language, but this dimension rarely emerged as a literal subject in her art as it did in Schendel's. Instead, her verbal experiments were confined to her copious diaries and notebooks, in which language was explored as an equivalent to her artistic practices.¹⁸ Many of the titles for Hesse's pieces result from these exercises, and indeed she invested a high degree of

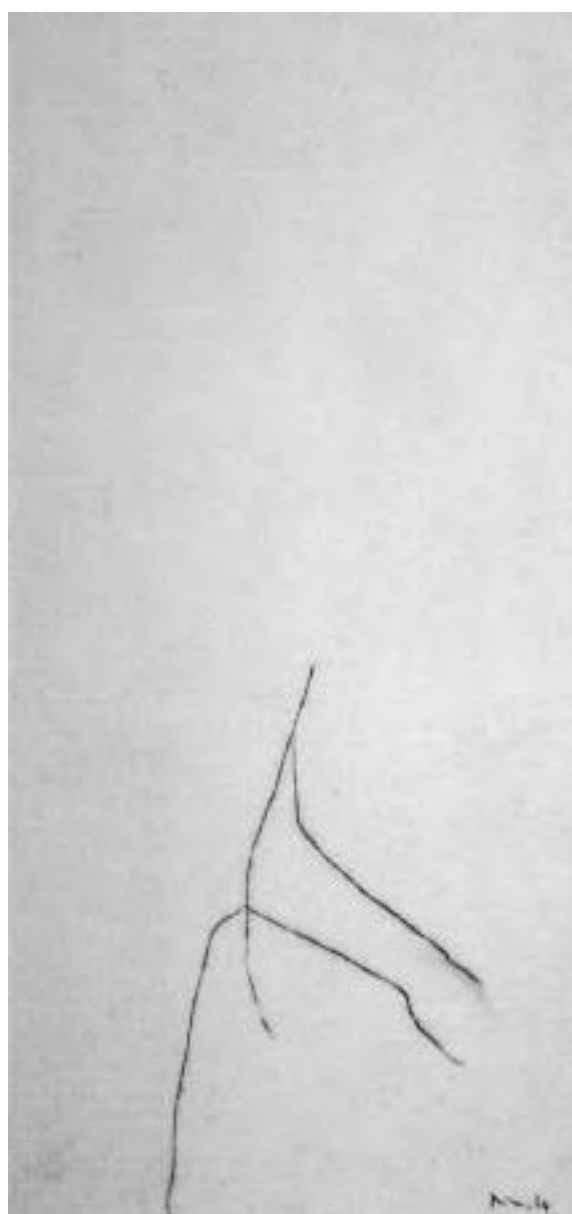


Fig. 9. Mira Schendel, *Untitled* (1964), oil transfer drawing on Japanese paper, 18 1/2" x 9 1/8". Collection Marcela and Israel Furmanovich.

meaning in her titles, disliking the unimportance suggested by leaving a work unnamed.¹⁹ Many of her titles are ambiguous and refrain from identifying any specific content in the work, but others are significant in suggesting an active dimension in the work, such as *Accretion*, which signals the completion of the process involved in its making.²⁰ Writing does appear in some of Hesse's early works on paper, however, as in a drawing from 1962 (Fig. 8), which suggests a proto-cognitive form of written language similar to that appearing in Schendel's *A trama* monotype. Here, Hesse's Twombly-esque scribbles—possibly inspired by Surrealist experiments in automatic writing²¹—vary in degree of aggressiveness, suggesting the presence of multiple hands in the work.²²

The presence of the hand ties the body to these drawings, since the traces and marks made on the paper are the process

of encoding a series of gestures made as the arm and hand extend away from the bodily axis.²³ Indeed, the gesture is an important notion for Schendel's monotypes, some of which are so subtle that the entire work becomes about one or two such simple gestures (1964; Fig. 9). The fact that the artist often used only her fingernail to impress the ink into the paper furthers this inscription of the body upon the work. As contact is made and the ink soaks into the paper, the gesture becomes fused into the support rather than lying on its surface: the traces seem to emerge from within the paper itself in a similar way that marks appear on living organisms from within, like a blemish or a bruise.²⁴ In addition to the small format of the works on the hand's scale and the use of a part of the artist's body itself as a mark-making tool, the body is further conferred onto Schendel's monotypes in subtle stained areas where the slight pressure from the artist's resting hand attracted a degree of ink as she worked.²⁵

In the monotypes, the trace left by the gesture suggests the body's innate expressiveness by embedding the residue of its actions within the surface of the paper.²⁶ This process takes place to an even greater extent in the *Droguinhas*, which become visual records of every action deposited in them: each gesture of the maker in twisting and knotting the rice paper is apparent. In fact, the gesture can be seen as both the primary subject matter and intent of the *Droguinhas*, as Schendel's objective was not in the creation of a finalized object. Rather, she envisioned the making of the *Droguinhas* as a temporary exercise with the end result of a transitory, disposable thing: this condition is underlined by her use of the term *droguinha*, which is slang in Brazil for something of no importance, a "mere trifle" that can be thrown away. This "throw-away" quality is apparent in the objects themselves in their humble materiality, resembling so many wads of tissue paper to be cast aside.

Schendel clarified her feelings on this issue in a 1977 statement in which she identifies impermanence and ephemerality as the primary conditions of the *Droguinhas*: for her, the *Droguinha* was an "ephemeral object, an object exposed in a way to transitoriness, just as in life."²⁷ That the *Droguinha* should operate "in life" confers upon it status as a living—and dying—thing: thus these works can be viewed as analogies for the human condition in a way that is similar to the element of mortality that is often ascribed to Hesse's sculptures. In Hesse's case, the transitoriness of her objects stems from the instability of their materials, prone to disintegrate and decay over time, as opposed to the intentional ephemerality of Schendel's approach to the *Droguinhas* as a series of actions. Obvious museological problems are posed by both groups of objects on account of this quality: Hesse's works present constant conservation challenges as their appearance deviates further and further from their original state, while the *Droguinhas* have been preserved as commodity objects in clear opposition to the artist's intentions.

Nevertheless, the preservation of these objects and their continued display is vital for subsequent generations to view and understand the works and their implications. For example, by including the *Droguinhas* in "Tangled Alphabets," Pérez-Oramas was able to illustrate their relation to his theories on

Schendel's use of language. For him, each knot and twist in the *Droguinhas* is like a word that, when connected to others, builds up to form a string of words or a coherent phrase.²⁸ Language becomes materialized in this way, or, in other words, is given a body as it was in the *Objetos Gráficos*. Rather than through the latter's inscription of actual letters and word fragments, however, the *Droguinhas*'s language is rendered mute. The fact that its language fails to be understandable is underlined by the fact that in Portuguese *droguinha* can also be used to mean "senseless," an appropriate description for these indecipherable masses.²⁹ In Pérez-Oramas's view, the muteness embodied by the *Droguinhas* is likened to the silence that lingers after a voice or voices have faded away—voices that have inscribed their words onto the surface of the object and are no longer present. The *Trenzinho*, on the other hand, presents another kind of muteness: an expectant silence awaiting the inscription of the word. Pérez-Oramas notes something ominous in the silent anticipation of the *Trenzinho*: translated as "little train," the work reminds him of the passenger trains carrying away detainees to unknown destinations during the Holocaust.³⁰

The silence emitted by the *Trenzinho* is heightened by its repetition of the blank page, normally the vehicle for written language (as in the monotypes, which also employ the same format of rice paper), now presented in multiple, and gaining meaning through blankness itself. This quality of blankness or emptiness is prevalent throughout Schendel's oeuvre, apparent both in her sculptural objects and works on paper. For example, in the monotypes the majority of the field of paper is left blank, with a few subtle gestures only serving to emphasize the surrounding emptiness. Schendel herself spoke of this quality in a 1965 letter written to critic Guy Brett: "I would say the line, often, just stimulates the void. I doubt whether the word stimulate is right. Something like that. At any rate what matters in my work is the void, actively the void."³¹ In response to statements like this one, scholarship on Schendel has adopted the void as a key concept in her works: in fact, "the void" has become the go-to theme in Schendel's somewhat briefer historiography in the same way that "the body" has served for Hesse.

Notably, Sonia Saltzstein organized an exhibition of Schendel's works in 1996 under the title "*No Vazio do Mundo*" lifted from an Italian phrase found in one of the monotypes (1964; Fig. 10), translating to "In the void of the world." For Saltzstein, the void—as manifested through Schendel's use of transparency in works like the *Objetos Gráficos* as well as the 1969 *Still Waves of Probability*, a *Penetrable*-like³² installation of translucent nylon threads suspended from the ceiling—embodies ideas of empowerment and renewal. In Saltzstein's view, the "void of the world" operates as a site for potential, a place where everything ends and begins again.³³ The literal passage through *Still Waves of Probability* or a visual one through an *Objeto Gráfico* is a circular process of becoming: the confrontation with the void provoking inquiry into the viewer's position in relation to it.³⁴

Guy Brett also notes the void's transformative potential in his essay "Actively the Void," but goes further in relating Schendel's interest to that of a wider spectrum of her artistic

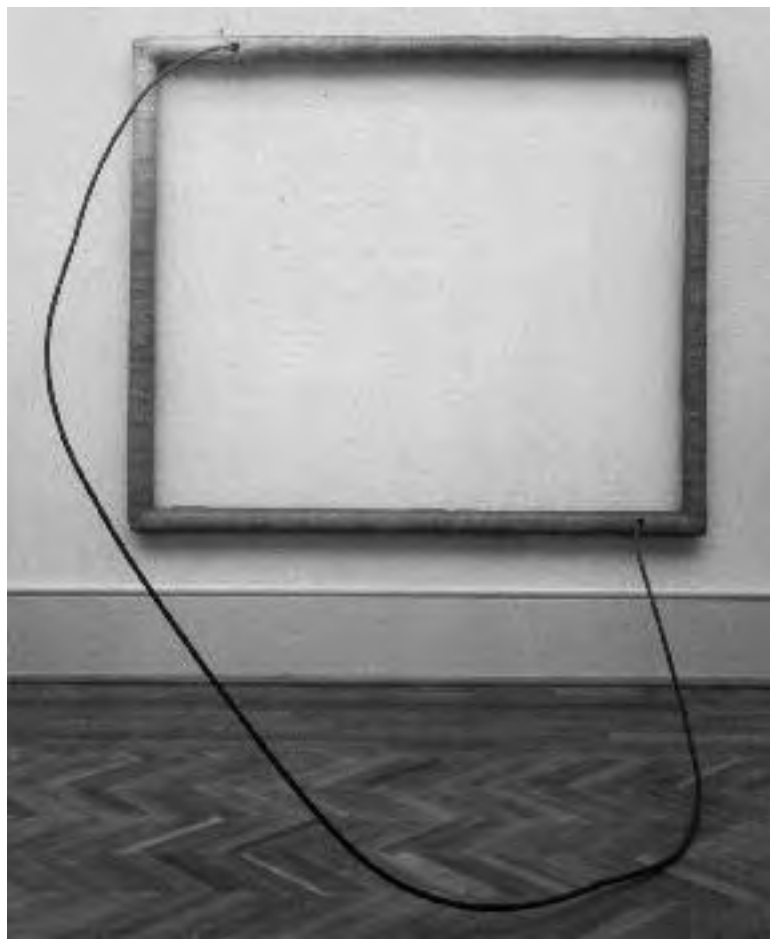


Fig. 10 (left). Mira Schendel, *Untitled* (1964), oil transfer drawing on Japanese paper, 18 1/8" x 9". Collection Cesare Rivetti.

Fig. 11 (right). Eva Hesse, *Hang-up* (1966), acrylic on cloth over wood and steel wire, 72" x 84" x 78". Art Institute of Chicago. Courtesy the Estate of Eva Hesse, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

contemporaries, both in Latin America and elsewhere.³⁵ Moreover, Brett maintains that notions of the void held a particular attraction in Brazil because of the void's ability to express "the contradiction, the clash—but as well the intimacy, the sense of longing—existing between the cosmic and the tropical, the philosophical and the political, the metaphysical and material."³⁶ Although this view of Brazil's penchant for contradiction is somewhat problematic, Brett likely had in mind a work like Oiticica's *Tropicália*, first exhibited in Rio de Janeiro in 1967—an installation of labyrinth-like cabins and tropical elements including sand, plants, and live parrots. The spectators' tactile-sensorial experience in traversing the labyrinth would culminate in their arriving in a dark, interior room (a void), where they were then instructed to riff into a microphone on the concept of "nothingness." For Oiticica, this journey was meant to evoke a sense of being devoured, a process central to the Brazilian concept of *antropofagia* which holds that the culture of Brazil was formed through the "cannibalistic" consumption of other cultures.³⁷ Here, too, the void becomes a site with the potential for transformation and new beginnings.

As we have seen, the void for Schendel is evoked by her use of empty space and transparency. A certain transparency is also present in Hesse works in the obvious construction of her materials: if the panels of *Contingent* relate to bodies then they must by extension be naked ones, as the layering of the latex leaves exposed every detail of the technique involved and the underlying support. A more literal blankness is found in a work like *Hang-up* (1966; Fig. 11), whose steel wire projects exaggeratedly out from a wrapped picture frame that offers a view onto nothing but the white gallery wall behind it. Briony Fer has noted an economy of loss in *Hang-up* and other of Hesse's works employing emptiness in relation to Melanie Klein's metaphor of blank space put forward in her 1929 essay "Infantile Anxiety Situations," a new take on Sigmund Freud's theories on infantile sexuality now focusing on the female experience. In the female version of castration anxiety, the young girl desires to rob the mother's body of its contents, which then leads to the fear that the girl's own body will also be mutilated.³⁸ In Klein's metaphor, blank space is equated with the site of lack within the body that relates to the loss and mourning of the maternal object, an empty space that can

never be filled.³⁹ Fer recognizes this drama of the loss of self and the threatened body within Hesse's works, and connects the artist's subconscious interest in the destruction of the mother with the loss of her own mother at an early age.

Even more resonant in Hesse's works than literal emptiness, however, is the concept of "nothingness" subsumed under the void. In fact, the word "nothing" is often applied to her art: fellow artist and friend Mel Bochner wrote of her method as one in which "nothing is incarnated into nothing."⁴⁰ Hesse, too, often referred to her own art as "nothing," or to the contradictory state of her pieces as at once "something and nothing."⁴¹ The untitled rope piece from 1970 exemplifies this paradox of simultaneous "somethingness" and "nothingness": conceived as the "ugly" counterpart to the more evanescent 1969 hanging piece *Right After*, to which she once referred as "a big nothing,"⁴² the untitled piece could be described similarly. As it is spread throughout the room, the rope piece is thinned out, denying the dense materiality of its latex-covered cords.⁴³ It has no inside or outside, top or bottom, front or back; its surface is entirely refuted, evoking "void" in its active sense as negation.⁴⁴ Hence the body that is viscerally present in Hesse's rope piece is both diffused and negated: it becomes a "big nothing" to Schendel's "little nothing" in the form of the *Droguinha*. That the notion of process is a factor in both works enhances their paradoxical nature, as laborious effort has gone into the making of a nothing: Schendel through her repeated gestures of twisting and knotting the rice paper, and Hesse in the dipping of her ropes in latex and their subsequent intertwining, knotting, and suspending. A certain obsessiveness is suggested by their methods, a quality often cited in Hesse's *Accession* series with its thousands of rubber elements threaded through perforated steel boxes.

Beyond their biographical similarities as female exile artists or any formal affinities in their art, it is this state of paradox that unites the works of these two disparate artists: they are simultaneously somethings and nothings, corporeal and evanescent, like the body and unlike the body. Hesse's works such as *Accession II* embody both the industrial and the organic, facing the viewer with something both familiar and inviting yet strange and repulsive; others like *Contingent* remind one of human flesh, not warm and inviting but brittle and decaying. Thus Hesse's works are both of the body and not of the body, and are reminiscent of a "tenuous bodiliness" like Bois's toenail. The body is made strange, or dissipated and deterritorialized into a "big nothing": it is negated, rendered void. Schendel, on the other hand, confers the bodily onto language, rendering it corporeal by giving it three-dimensionality. Blank space, too, is made corporeal, as traces of the gesture emerge from within the paper of the monotypes, or are sculpted into "little nothings" in the *Droguinhas*. While Schendel seems to wrest a body from the void, Hesse compromises—and makes void—this body once again. •

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Notes

1. Schendel was born in Zurich, Switzerland, and spent her youth in Berlin and Milan; Hesse was born in Hamburg, Germany, and also lived in Holland and England before her family settled in America.
2. Hesse, who received artistic training under Josef Albers at Yale University and during a later sojourn in Germany, was deeply entrenched in the vibrant New York art scene. Schendel, on the other hand, mostly pursued her artistic interests independently before settling into the more diffuse art economy of Brazil, abstaining for the most part from participation within its artistic collectives.
3. Schendel's work was never shown in the United States during Hesse's lifetime, although it did receive some international recognition with showings such as that at the Signals Gallery in London in 1965 and the 1968 Venice Biennale. Similarly, it is unlikely that Hesse's work was known in Brazil in the mid-1960s, as she did not start to achieve true international acclaim until the final year of her life, aided by spreads on her work appearing in *Artforum* and *Life* magazine in 1970.
4. Roberta Smith, "Alternative Modernism via South America," *New York Times*, April 2, 2009.
5. Ibid.
6. The devices of hanging, gravity, and the inertia of entropy are traditionally ascribed to so-called "Post-Minimalism," a term often used to categorize Hesse's art in addition to that of others such as Robert Smithson and Robert Morris. Schendel's *Droguinhas*, too, could easily have been included in Morris's 1968 "Anti-Form" exhibition for their amorphousness and process-oriented manufacture: however, to refer to Schendel as "a Post-Minimalist before the fact," as Smith does in her review (ibid.), is inherently problematic, as it assumes Schendel to be a stepping stone on the Hegelian path toward an apex of modern Western art.
7. Briony Fer, "The Work of Salvage: Eva Hesse's Latex Works," in Elisabeth Sussman, ed. *Eva Hesse* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in cooperation with Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 87.
8. Hesse herself alluded to the sexual ambiguity of this piece, once referring to it as both "a breast and penis"; see James Meyer, "Non, Nothing, Everything: Hesse's 'Abstraction,'" in Sussman, ed., *Eva Hesse*, 57. Rosalind Krauss has noted a further erotic parallel for Hesse's reliefs in Marcel Duchamp's Rotoreliefs, equating her concentric forms to Duchamp's autoerotic spirals; see Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 315.
9. Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1976), 187.
10. Krauss, *Optical Unconscious*, 316-20. The 1970 rope piece is exemplary of Krauss's concept of the "body without organs" in its amorphousness and lack of center.
11. Meyer, "Non, Nothing, Everything," 66.
12. Yve-Alain Bois, "Dumb," in *Eva Hesse: Sculpture* (New York: The Jewish Museum, in cooperation with Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 27; and Fer, "The Work of Salvage," 80.
13. For more on Hesse and the grotesque see Robert Storr, "Do the Wrong Thing: Eva Hesse and the Abstract Grotesque," in Helen A. Cooper, ed., *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 85-98.
14. Hesse died of a brain tumor at age 34, after a brief, ten-year artistic career.
15. Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 348.
16. Sonia Salzstein has argued that the transparency of the *Objetos Gráficos* allows not just for the passage of light and perception, but also a psychological passage of the subject into an "other"—a

commutation of one thing into another; see Salzstein, "In the Void of the World," in Salzstein, ed., *No Vazio do Mundo: Mira Schendel* (São Paulo: Galeria de Arte do SESI, in cooperation with Marca D'Água, 1996), 39.

17. Luis Pérez-Oramas, *Tangled Alphabets: Leon Ferrari and Mira Schendel* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 13. The *Objetos Gráficos* become bodies of language to be deciphered with the body—words viewed circularly as the spectator moves around the works.
18. Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 168.
19. Cindy Nemser, "A Conversation with Eva Hesse (1970)," in Mignon Nixon, ed., *Eva Hesse* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002), 17. While many of the works on paper remain untitled, the sculptural reliefs and objects are rarely so. Exceptions include some works made in her final year, most notably the "rope piece."
20. Crow, *Rise of the Sixties*, 168.
21. Renate Petzinger, "Thoughts on Hesse's Early Work, 1959-65," in Sussman, ed., *Eva Hesse*, 48. Petzinger sites a possible influence in the 1961 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, "The Art of Assemblage," which included examples of automatic drawing.
22. Mignon Nixon, "'Child' Drawing," in Catherine de Zegher, ed., *Eva Hesse Drawing* (New York: The Drawing Center, in cooperation with Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 40.
23. Catherine De Zegher, "Drawing as Binding/Bandage/Bondage or Eve Hesse Caught in the Triangle of Process/Content/Materiality," in *ibid.*, 99.
24. Pérez-Oramas, *Tangled Alphabets*, 27.
25. Rodrigo Naves, in Salzstein, ed., *No Vazio do Mundo*, 68. This literal impression of the artist's hand on the work has parallels in the occasional handprint left by Jackson Pollock in his all-over canvases, or even more so in Jasper Johns' "Skin Drawings" of the early 1960s, in which he left a *vera icon* of his face and hands in charcoal on a sheet of drawing paper coated in baby oil.
26. Sonia Salzstein, "Mira Schendel: The Immersion of the Body in Thought," in Alma Ruiz et. al, *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom: Lygia Clark, Gego, Mathias Goeritz, Hélio Oiticica, and Mira Schendel* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 215.
27. Rodrigo Naves, "Mira Schendel: The World as Generosity," in Pérez-Oramas, *Tangled Alphabets*, 64.

28. Pérez-Oramas, *Tangled Alphabets*, 32. Pérez-Oramas points to the fact that the root word for "language" in Latin can also be used to designate "knot."
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 34.
31. Guy Brett, "Actively the Void," in Salzstein, ed., *No Vazio do Mundo*, 57.
32. *Penetrable* refers to the similar structures of suspended plastic strands made by Venezuelan kinetic artist Jesús Rafael Soto, beginning in the late 1960s, that were meant to be entered and experienced with the entire body. Soto's fabrications, however, are much more vibrant and colorful than Schendel's evanescent *Still Waves*.
33. Salzstein, ed., *No Vazio do Mundo*, 207. Salzstein sites Schendel's interest in origins in her recurrent use of the motifs of the circle and spiral; we have also noted this in her loyalty to the primordial letter "A."
34. *Ibid.*, 31-32.
35. Brett, "Actively the Void," 58. One thinks of Yves Klein's 1958 *Le Vide* exhibition at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris in which the audience was invited into nothing other than an empty room.
36. *Ibid.*, 60.
37. Oiticica's confrontation with "the tropical" was not meant to be nationalistic or to buy into folkloric stereotypes of Brazilian culture, but instead was envisioned as a semi-satirical defense mechanism to counteract invading North American cultural trends. Ironically, his term *Tropicália* has been adopted by the kitschy genre of popular music known as *tropicalismo*.
38. Briony Fer, "Bordering on Blank: Eva Hesse and Minimalism (1994)," in Nixon, ed. *Eva Hesse*, 71.
39. *Ibid.*, 71.
40. Meyer, "Non, Nothing, Everything," 72.
41. Sussman, *Eva Hesse*, 31.
42. Fer, "Bordering on Blank," 58.
43. Fer, "Work of Salvage," 93.
44. *Ibid.*, 92.

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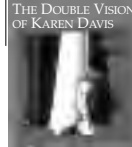
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PHOTOGRAPHY THE DOUBLE VISION OF KAREN DAVIS



When I was and Last Picture of My Mother and Me.
Left: Karen Davis, self-portrait

The double vision of Karen Davis's gaze is brought together in her images. From the earliest, Davis's work is grounded in the documentary tradition, but it is a tradition of her own making, one that is deeply personal. She is a woman who has lived through the most difficult of times, and her work is a testament to her resilience. Her photographs are not just images; they are stories. They are the stories of a woman who has lived through the most difficult of times, and her work is a testament to her resilience. Her photographs are not just images; they are stories. They are the stories of a woman who has lived through the most difficult of times, and her work is a testament to her resilience.

THE WOMAN PROBLEM

GENDER DISPLACEMENT IN THE ART OF HELEN FRANKENTHALER

By Bett Schumacher

Most of the important recent scholarship on the American painter Helen Frankenthaler (b. 1928) maintains that the critical reception of her work in the 1950s and 1960s was acutely gendered. These were crucial years for the development of Frankenthaler's art. During this time she developed her signature "soak-stain" painting method, by which thinned paint is soaked and spread into unprimed canvas laid on the floor. This period also witnessed some of her greatest critical success. However, scholars today hold that contemporary critics, whether praising or disparaging Frankenthaler's abstract canvases, always found them "appropriate." Whether lyrical, delicate, erotic, or hysterical, the painting was always clearly a woman's handiwork.¹

Indeed, several early critics noted Frankenthaler's gender in their reviews. Writing in 1966 for *Art News*, B. H. Friedman called Frankenthaler's soak-stain technique "free, lyrical, and feminine," and her color palette "seductive and feminine." He also recognized a "sexual analogy" in the artist's bodily painting process.² Several years earlier, the poet and critic James Schuyler had remembered a "sensibility altogether feminine" in the nineteen paintings, all done between 1951-52 and 1959, that comprised Frankenthaler's 1960 retrospective exhibition at New York City's Jewish Museum.³ Moreover, in a ranting review of that 1960 retrospective, which triggered an angry response from *Art News* readers, Anne Seelye wrote about Frankenthaler's 1950s oeuvre, including such paintings as *Giralda* (1956) and *Trojan Gates* (1955; Fig. 1):

One cannot be satisfied only to look for the sudden, surprising visual beauties; one is in the presence of an hysterical temperament, and must take account of that. There are women who wish they had these qualities, and there are men who wish they might fall in love, tragically, with that personality. The paintings are romantic, hypersensitive, sulky, and filled with surface tensions.⁴

It would seem, then, that gender was indeed a principal lens through which Frankenthaler's early audiences regarded her work. They judged it to be feminized in almost every imaginable category: color, form, effect on the viewer, and proximity to its maker.

Yet Helen Frankenthaler herself has been famously skeptical about the role an artist's gender should play in the



Fig. 1. Helen Frankenthaler, *Trojan Gates* (1955), oil on canvas, 72" x 48 7/8". Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Allan D. Emil.

production or the reception of her art. As she told Henry Geldzahler at the time,

Looking at my paintings as if they were by a woman is superficial, a side issue, like looking at Klines and saying they are bohemian. The making of serious paintings is difficult and complicated for all serious painters. One must be oneself, whatever.⁵



Fig. 2. Ernst Haas, *American abstract expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler at work on a large canvas* (1969). Photo by Ernst Haas/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

For Frankenthaler, analyzing a work of art exclusively in gendered terms detracts from its intentionality and seriousness. Of course she acknowledges that gender might be an issue that complicates her painting: “one must be oneself.” Being a woman is something over which she has no control, but it may well affect her art. It is not, however, something she actively cultivates in paint or foregrounds in her art. Rather, Frankenthaler views “femaleness” as neither a positive nor a productive aesthetic category.

Perhaps this resistance is hard to understand more than thirty-five years after Linda Nochlin asked, “Why have there been no great women artists?”⁶ Today many women artists routinely embrace and explore gender in their work, and gender theory is an established method of art historical analysis. But remembering the time and the place in which Frankenthaler made her disavowal—the infamously masculinized New York art world of the 1950s and 1960s—what happens if we decide to take that disavowal seriously? What more can we discover about the work if we respect—and attempt to examine—her ambivalence about being a woman painter? What more can we learn if we investigate how the artist thought through this vexing issue in and through her art-making? How has Frankenthaler supplemented, or even attempted to displace, the particular, individual presence of the artist—including, logically, her femininity—with a broader evocation of subjectivity with which a viewer of either gender could identify? I believe that this supplementation or substitution of the embodied subjectivity of the beholder in relation to the embodied subjectivity of the painter required Frankenthaler to first

address and, in turn, to displace femininity as a dimension of the presence of her person in the context of her art. By looking at the degree to which critics intuited these procedures within the canvases themselves, I hope to demonstrate that Frankenthaler’s critical reception was more complicated than recent scholarship would have us believe.

Griselda Pollock has argued that in the 1950s, the American modernist artist who happened to be a woman faced a difficult challenge.⁷ Modernist abstraction seemed to offer a promise of objectivity whereby one’s gender would not factor into the creation and reception of a work of art. But, in fact, any artist staking out her own space within modernism—determining how to make work that was special and different—had to muster all the conditions of her individuality as fodder for her art. As Frankenthaler herself described it, “every fact of one’s reality is in one’s work: age, height, weight, history, nationality, religion, sex, pains, habits, attractions.”⁸ Yet at the same time, this artist had to avoid being labeled a “woman artist” (which, according to Pollock, “means no artist at all”). She had to avoid making art that evinced “femininity,” and instead pursue what would make her different, what would make her modernism unique without reflecting her gender difference.¹⁰ Thus Frankenthaler would conclude her thoughts on how the self factored into her painting by declaring that, “being female is one of many in this long list for me, but has never been a specific issue by itself. What you call ‘female quality’ is a serious fact that I enjoy, and part of a total working picture.”¹¹

Borrowing from Carol Duncan’s scholarship, Pollock asserts that in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, modern art was being masculinized in terms of its



Fig. 3. Ernst Haas, *Abstract expressionist artist Helen Frankenthaler at work in her studio* (1969). Photo by Ernst Haas/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

methods, representations, and self-conception.¹² A sexual hierarchy was mapped onto artistic practice and embodied in the trope of the artist in his studio. At the top of the hierarchy was the artist, the active male mind and body at work. In the middle was the object, the canvas waiting to be inscribed. At the bottom was the “other”: the muse that inspires the artist preparing to mark the canvas. “That from which art is made because art is other to it” was femininity, or nature, as personified by the nude female model in the studio.¹³ Thus the role of the female body in artistic production was passive. Male genius and the male painting body were needed to activate it.

By the mid-twentieth-century, Pollock claims, some of the terms in this conception of modern art had changed, but women and femininity still constituted the “other.” Femininity had become associated not with nature but with artificiality: e.g., make-up, hair dye, and the celluloid sex symbol, and the conception of masculinity had evolved as well, so that masculinity and femininity remained opposites: men were “natural” by comparison to painted women. The foil for the sex symbol was the serious, esteemed, “naturally” gifted male “method” actor.¹⁴ Within art-making, terms had changed too. The nude female in the studio had all but disappeared as abstraction took the vanguard. Instead of looking to the female model for inspiration, the Abstract Expressionist artist, as personified by Jackson Pollock, engaged in painterly dialogue with the horizontal blank canvas. The cotton duck supplanted, or even subsumed, the nude female body in the studio. Displacing the female body as the vessel for male artistic desire and the stuff of artistic inspiration, the canvas, according to Griselda Pollock, became the object for the artist to master.¹⁵

But what of the woman who wanted to occupy the studio and make art? How did the woman artist envision the feminine “other” she needed to make art against and through? How could she occupy the place of the active quasi-masculine painter? In an era when popular culture portrayed the ultimate woman as a sex symbol, and the quintessential artist as an ultra-masculine “action painter,” how did a woman artist define herself?¹⁶ Griselda Pollock argues that the American

woman artist at mid-century attempted to solve these problems by envisioning a new “third term” within the conventional dyad of (masculine) painter and (feminine) muse.¹⁷ Pollock calls this discrete psychic presence the “creative woman’s body.”¹⁸ During this period, she posits, the creative woman’s body was an imagined body onto which women artists could project their femininity; the fantasy of the creative woman’s body became the receptacle for the female artist’s gender identity. This psychic “body” allowed the “body” in the canvas to seem neutered, and the painter’s body outside the canvas to be invested with all the authority modernism usually grants men.¹⁹

Griselda Pollock identifies Frankenthaler as one of the women artists of the 1950s who was able to displace her femininity onto a creative woman’s body. To demonstrate how Frankenthaler’s activity suggests “a profoundly different way of being in the body”²⁰ than Jackson Pollock’s, she compares photographs of Frankenthaler painting in 1969 (Fig. 2), taken by the photographer Ernst Haas, with Hans Namuth’s famous shots of Jackson Pollock at work in 1950. Griselda Pollock observes Frankenthaler entering, kneeling, and sitting upon the canvases and using “pouring, pushing, smoothing gestures.”²¹ By contrast, she sees Jackson Pollock dominating his canvases, towering over them and practically assaulting them with a paint-covered stick.²² She concludes that by adopting a version of Jackson Pollock’s physical painting process, Frankenthaler placed herself at the apex of the sexual hierarchy that was typically occupied by a male body. At the same time, the modifications she made to his process—substituting smoothing for flinging, and relation for dominance—also suggest that Frankenthaler considered the painting as a continuation of her own space, and therefore that she was sensitive to the relation of her own (female) body to the cotton duck on the floor, the “body of canvas” that, in Griselda Pollock’s terms, conjures up the “feminine” body of the “other.”

By failing to see the *forcefulness* of Frankenthaler’s presence to her canvases, Griselda Pollock thus misses the real lesson of the Haas photographs. The artist does not merely sit and smooth. Her activity is much more athletic, her painting method even more physical and vigorous than Jackson Pollock’s. Another 1969 photo by Haas (Fig. 3), for example, shows Frankenthaler on tip-toe, leaning into her canvas, supporting the weight of her body with one arm while she extends the other as far as she can to make a mark. Her remarkable physical strength allows her to hold her body close to the canvas while remaining just outside of it. I believe that while the Haas photographs indeed suggest that Frankenthaler envisioned something like a creative woman’s body for her practice, they do not do so by evoking an essentialist relation of woman painter to canvas, as Griselda Pollock maintains. Rather, the photographs indicate the presence of something like a creative woman’s body in the way they reveal to us the *ambiguity* of Frankenthaler’s bodily relation to her work.

Thus, while I see value in Griselda Pollock’s concept of the “creative woman’s body” as situated in relation both to



Fig. 4 (left). Helen Frankenthaler, *Madridscape* (1959), oil on canvas, 102" x 161 1/2". Baltimore Museum of Art. Anonymous Gift BMA 1966.54.



Fig. 5 (below). Helen Frankenthaler, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1957), oil on canvas, 95 1/2" x 70 1/8". Private collection.

women artists' own femininity and to the corporeality evoked in the painting of others, both male and female, I disagree with Pollock's specific claims for Frankenthaler, above all in their fixity—their failure to account for variations, ambiguities, and identification in both the production and reception of her work. Additionally, in contrast to Pollock's suggestion that Frankenthaler's painting is a meditation on *differentiation* which happens psychically through procedures of identification, I see that engagement with differentiation happening within Frankenthaler's paintings themselves.²³ For example, Frankenthaler's monumental painting *Madridscape* (Fig. 4 and Pls. 4, 4A, 4B) can be construed to explore a relationship between the body within the canvas and the body or bodies outside the canvas (the painter's body, and, to appropriate Pollock's language, the third term of the "creative woman's body"). In juxtaposing these real and imagined bodies, Frankenthaler suggests that she does indeed intuit differences among them.

A large oil, about nine by thirteen feet, *Madridscape* was painted, as John Elderfield documents, as a "recapitulation" of the trip to Spain Frankenthaler took with Robert Motherwell in the summer of 1958.²⁴ It also reworks a smaller mixed-media work on paper of the same title that she made while a guest at the Madrid Ritz. The massive painting is divided into three vertical registers. The left- and rightmost columns are topped by blue arches, the middle column by a green arch; all three recall the Spanish architecture that Frankenthaler likely saw during her trip. Reinforcing the impression of a Spanish cityscape shaped in part by Moorish influences is the presence of a blue-outlined, dome-like shape in the painting's left section. The three arches capping each of the three vertical registers contribute to a palpable sense of "surrounding" or "enfolding" in *Madridscape*. The blue and green arches merge with rounded ochre lines at the bottom left and along the right edge and bottom of the painting to effect an ovoid composition.

A smaller ring shape is formed by the connection of the three arches to the three caryatid-like shapes that occupy the center and right columns of the painting. (Within the context of a columnar composition, the figural shapes call to mind



Fig. 6. Helen Frankenthaler, *Basque Beach* (1958), oil on canvas, 58 5/8" x 69 5/8". Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966.

anthropomorphic pillars.) Here I am referring to the washy, dark, anthropomorphic shape at right, the ochre figure with red "hair" in the center, and the outlined suggestion of a figure to their left. All three, backs turned and clasped hands raised, reach out to touch the blue and green arches that then recede into space. The grouping evokes something like a football huddle or a game of ring-around-the-rosy, in the context of which the circle of figures would spin. (The group would rotate around the tiny blue building-like shape with the pointed "rooftop-tower" that occupies the picture's center-point.) Moreover, a third compositional ring is suggested by the juxtaposition of the figures to the horizontal red swoosh that sails out of the red splattered "mountain peak" shape drawn just under the green arch. The swoosh heads right, thickening into a red wedge that runs into the "throat" of the washy brownish-black figure. The swoosh and the figures together form a third, tighter, innermost ring. This circle, then, is circumscribed by the ring suggested by the touch of raised arm to arch, and also set within the flat ovoid on the surface of the canvas.

Madridscape is thus composed of a series of increasingly tight encirclements set on different axes. This sense of surrounding or enfolding reaches out to encompass the beholder. Though the three figure-like shapes appear to be facing away from us, the logic of the composition, and its scale, suggest that we might slip underneath a raised arm and join their spinning circle. If anything, these figures seen from the back do not so much shut us out from the composition as mirror our position in front of the canvas. In this way they become stand-ins for us, anticipating our imagined entrance into the painting. The same kind of anthropomorphic figures

can be found in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1957; Fig. 4), in the figure outlined in red in the left-hand side of the painting, and in *Basque Beach* (1958; Fig. 5), in the three stooped figures who seem to walk across the canvas in the distance, heading right.²⁵

Such "entrance" is also thematized in *Madridscape*, albeit differently, by the footprints littering the composition. As Frankenthaler trod across the canvas, her shoes left numerous impressions, many of them dusty or paint-splotted. Anne M. Wagner has written about incidental body marks like these in Frankenthaler's work—footprints scattered in the lower left-hand corner of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, a body print (left, perhaps, by the artist's hip or knee) "blooming" in the lower right-hand corner of *Mountains and Sea* (1952; Pls. 5, 5A).²⁶ For Wagner, these marks record the artist's "accidental presence" to the canvas, but, importantly, they do not constitute part of the picture *within* the canvas.²⁷ They mark but one instance of Frankenthaler's presence to the canvas: her working body. Other types of presence include her creative mind, evoked by the pictorial scene she creates within the depths of the canvas; and her critical mind, her emergence from the pictorial depths in order to evaluate her mark, evoked by those painterly marks that seem

more deliberately surface-oriented.²⁸

In *Madridscape*, however, I believe that Frankenthaler does contemplate and indeed does figure her working body within the painted scene. Moreover, she considers and evokes the relation that body has to the other bodily ways she is present to her painting. Accompanying the footprints made by the painter's body (to use Griselda Pollock's term for the masculinized artistic progenitor) is a greenish gray depiction of a footprint applied on top of the red swoosh in the right-hand column of the picture (Pl. 4A). The print cannot have resulted from Frankenthaler actually tracking paint she stepped in across the canvas, for only the heel is solid green. The rest of the sole is simply outlined. "Real" footprints intrude into the space all around the painted print, reinforcing the sense of the painted print as a footprint, but also inviting the viewer to recognize its difference from those that surround it.

Just as a real footprint marks the presence of the painter's body to the canvas, a painted footprint also invites us to imagine a body walking on the surface. This artificial presence was made as a representation and not a trace, by her painting hand, not her stepping foot, and thus this painted footprint can be imagined as something like the mark left by the "creative woman's body." The creative woman's body, as Pollock theorizes, is a productive but artificial construct that mediates the contradictory ways masculinity and femininity are usually allowed in painting. Similarly, the painted footprint is an artificial go-between for the dusty footprint of the painter's body and another kind of mark that appears in *Madridscape*: the mark of the subsumed feminine "other."

Near the center of the painting, above and to the left of the blue building shape, are a number of subtle red marks (Pl. 4B)



Fig. 7. Helen Frankenthaler, *Eden* (1956), oil on canvas, 103" x 117". Private collection.

(I count thirteen). These are traces of the fronts and the backs of Frankenthaler's fingers. It appears that the artist dipped her hand into red pigment and rolled it on the surface of the canvas, as we can see fingerprints as well as the outline of a small nail bed. These traces of a hand, nail-side-up, recreate the hand of the painter marking the surface. Yet the finger traces, pad-side-up, suggest a body subsumed within the painting (an impression that *Madridscape's* circular, enfolding composition reinforces). Upon noticing the second kind of fingerprints, we imagine a body beneath the surface, reaching its palms up, an impression that we also get from Frankenthaler's *Eden* (1956; Fig 7), in which a robust orange shape near the top right-hand corner calls to mind an upheld five-fingered hand.²⁹ Of course, in the actual moment these marks were laid down on *Madridscape*, their orientations were reversed. The impression of Frankenthaler's nail bed is the result of her pressing the back of her hand on the canvas, and the fingerprints of pressing down her palm.

In this way Frankenthaler indicates some of the complexity of her bodily presence to the canvas. On the one hand, she marks from above with the body of the painter. On the other, she reaches as if from the depths, as if imbricated, that is, in the canvas in which her painted "figures" appear. (The fact that the marks actually trace a reversed orientation of artist to canvas underscores the convoluted relation these embodiments bear to one another.) Thus the artist imagines what it would be like not only to walk on the canvas and mark its surface as its creator, but also to be subsumed within the canvas—specifically, to be a subsumed *body*, one whose mark-making is manifested as the traces of patterns inscribed in skin. Referring once again to Griselda Pollock, we might say that Frankenthaler envisions herself as encompassing both the feminine body of the "other" concealed within the Abstract Expressionist picture, and the painter's body that produced such pictures.



Fig. 8. Helen Frankenthaler, *Blue Territory* (1955), oil on canvas, 113" x 58". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Certainly, these handprints are small moments within a very large painting. Nevertheless, they establish at the very least that the artist paused during the pictorial action to consider different ways her body related to her work. We can imagine Frankenthaler accidentally spilling red paint on her hand, or inadvertently touching a paint-covered finger to the canvas and becoming curious enough to pursue the possibilities proposed by such an accident—perhaps kneeling or squatting and touching her hand to the canvas: once, twice,

then turning it over and pressing it again against the cotton duck. The significance for the painting comes from her decision to leave the marks, near the heart of the painting, rather than to obliterate or reconfigure them. The handprints thus become implicated within the pictorial action in a way that dusty footprints or knee or hip indentations do not. The red fingers demonstrate that, at least this once, the artist actively contemplated the different ways her painting was embodied. In *Madridscape*, then, we see Frankenthaler contemplating her own discrete bodily orientations to the canvas. In Griselda Pollock's terms, she displaces her femaleness onto a fantasized third term body, leaving the canvas and the painter gender-free.

As mentioned earlier, many of today's scholars hold that critics in the fifties and sixties routinely characterized Frankenthaler's painting as unambiguously feminine. Actually, the critical response was often more complicated than that. Many who saw Frankenthaler's femininity implicated in the canvases also perceived artistic strength and bravery. And as James Schuyler intuited a "feminine sensibility" in Frankenthaler's 1960 Jewish Museum retrospective, he also acknowledged that it had taken a "special courage" on the part of the artist to calm the "think-tough and paint-tough grain of New York School abstract painting." Schuyler also took pains to emphasize that Frankenthaler's paler beauty was not "weak."³⁰ Other critics also identified bravery, ruggedness, and even braggadocio in Frankenthaler's painting. Writing in December 1951 about her first solo exhibition, a show at New York's Tibor de Nagy Gallery that included such canvases as *Painted on 21st Street* (1950-51) and *The Jugglers* (1951), Paul Brach described the young artist as "imaginative, fearless, and immensely talented."³¹ Likewise, in his review of Frankenthaler's January 1958 solo show at de Nagy, Parker Tyler recognized Frankenthaler's "hand and eye" as "explorative in the most urgent 'wilderness' sense."³² As Anne M. Wagner has noted, two years earlier Tyler had unmistakably likened the forms within and effects of paintings such as the explosive *Blue Territory* (1955; Fig. 8) to male physiology:

Helen Frankenthaler returns [to de Nagy] this year with canvases drenched with her fervor for painterliness, and none of the younger artists has a more immediate feeling for paint itself to make this fervor authentic. Her courage is worth a double-take; she can make the paint-mass spurt like a leak in a dike and yet control it till it laps the canvas like a spent wave. She has as free a curve and spontaneous a thrust as Pollock, and a stretch of outsize canvas is like a dare to her.³³

What is more, rather than seeing mere pictorial femininity, or at the very least in addition to pictorial femininity, many of Frankenthaler's (mostly male) critics apparently saw *themselves*. Their reviews paint Frankenthaler's pictures as discrete entities that somehow mirrored the critics' own subjectivities back to them. For example, just as Parker Tyler clearly perceived the operations of his own male body in

Frankenthaler's pictorial procedures, James Schuyler, writing about her 1957 show at de Nagy, saw his own experiences in the work on view, which included such monumental soak-stain canvases as *Lorelei* (1956, Fig. 9):

To sum up at the beginning: it is in work of this quality that the continuity of free abstract painting, the kind particularly associated with Jackson Pollock, is found: working directly with the medium, not from motifs or sketches; variety of handling; getting what is inside outside, where it can be evaluated, worked on further, or left alone: the liberation and control of having painted and being a painter; the fact of being one among many with something special to paint that others have seen and experienced (Helen Frankenthaler does not paint in Pollock's shadow; that would be a misapprehension).³⁴

Schuyler clearly recognized Frankenthaler's painterly exploration of freedom and control. He also observed her effort to paint intuitively and subjectively (to paint what is "inside" her) while subjecting that interiority to analysis and criticism, if warranted. Furthermore, he pronounces that she is capable of painting that which "others have seen and experienced." Here Schuyler can be understood to imply, on the one hand, that Frankenthaler's pictures remind us of events from our own lives, but, on the other hand, and perhaps more profoundly, that her paintings depict the memories and feelings of others, the *inner states* of others (in addition, of course, to her own).

After seeing Frankenthaler's 1954 show at the de Nagy Gallery, which included such works as *Plateau*, *The Desert*, and *Passport*, Frank O'Hara concurred that she let "the truth stand forth plainly and of itself...In all of these paintings there is an original use of the artistic temper, a disdain of appearances, and sometimes a private unpleasantness of tenor which is made beautiful by its unimpeded self-assertion—which is to say that then the artist disappears and we have a fact of experience."³⁵ In other words, the paintings were not mediated depictions of personal, individual experience or feeling—experience or feeling filtered through the artist's subjectivity. For O'Hara, Frankenthaler was somehow able to make herself disappear in order to show us our own, as it were, universal experience. Martica Sawin, reviewing the same 1954 de Nagy show, similarly saw Frankenthaler suppressing her own subjectivity, the better to model ours:

Nothing intrudes in this laconic work between the observer and the paint, no odious trace of an idea, no superfluous painterliness; we are free to respond wholly to the unadulterated intensity of the artist's emotion, or to follow the fancies of our own imaginations in inventing meanings and explanations, to be as subjective as we like, for this art is as yet beyond the reach of objectivity.³⁶

Viewers could choose to consider either the painter's emotional states as evoked in the canvases or their own. When

Sawin concluded that there was “no odious trace of an idea” in the painting, she was not claiming that the work is unintelligent but rather that it does not contain objective themes that might distract from observers contemplation of their own experience of the painting and, by extension, of their own imagination and subjectivity.³⁷ Schuyler, O’Hara and Sawin, then, each describe how Frankenthaler’s work seems to delve into the beholder’s subjectivity, even if that beholder happened to be male.

Thus, despite what much of today’s scholarship contends, several of Frankenthaler’s most thoughtful critics did *not* deem her painting essentially feminine; for them, it did not immediately conjure up the painter’s female body. To the contrary, Tyler, O’Hara, Schuyler, Sawin and others proposed that the presence of the artist was *minimized* in her work. They saw paintings that evoked subjectivity more broadly, that encouraged intimately engaged viewers to invest them with their own feelings.

Reviewing Frankenthaler’s Jewish Museum retrospective for *Arts Magazine*, Donald Judd also perceived subjectivity in Frankenthaler’s body of work. He considered the nineteen canvases on view, all but one of which were soak-stain paintings, clearly inspired by Pollock’s Duco enamel paintings of 1951-52.³⁸ But he believed her work departed from Pollock’s in its “massed ambience and warmth,” and its rejection of rigid frontality.³⁹ Judd’s opinion of Frankenthaler was largely positive. He notes that “Frankenthaler’s [different] purpose” is “certainly as valid as Pollock’s”; but he worries about whether Frankenthaler has given herself room to move forward. Pollock, he says, combines his canvases’ many parts into one statement, resulting in an evenness of surface that is “cool,” or objective, and that discourages a beholder from trying to penetrate it. By contrast, he believes that Frankenthaler’s ambiguous space and scattered pockets of figuration or near figuration cause divisions that suggest something utterly subjective, like the compartments of the mind or the layers of the psyche. For Judd, the painting thus embodies the artist’s “unique theory of the imagination” whereby reality is a “disparate collection.” Taking Judd’s analysis a step further, it follows that Frankenthaler’s segmented canvases also call for a viewer who vigorously interacts with the work: selecting, sorting, juxtaposing. The implication seems clear that the psyche the painting depicts, because it’s the psyche the painting engages, is the viewer’s own.

Beginning in the early 1950s, Frankenthaler’s critics consistently described her painting as ambitiously, and productively, ambiguous. They also understood that this degree of pictorial ambiguity necessitated an active beholder. Critic after critic pronounced her canvases nearly impossible to fix in the mind. For example, reviewing Frankenthaler’s first solo exhibition in 1951, Paul Brach observed that her forms appeared to hang momentarily, almost readable as “symbols,” or figuration, before they were “whisked away,” to sink back into ground.⁴⁰ In other words, aspects of Frankenthaler’s painting shifted between figure and ground, and again

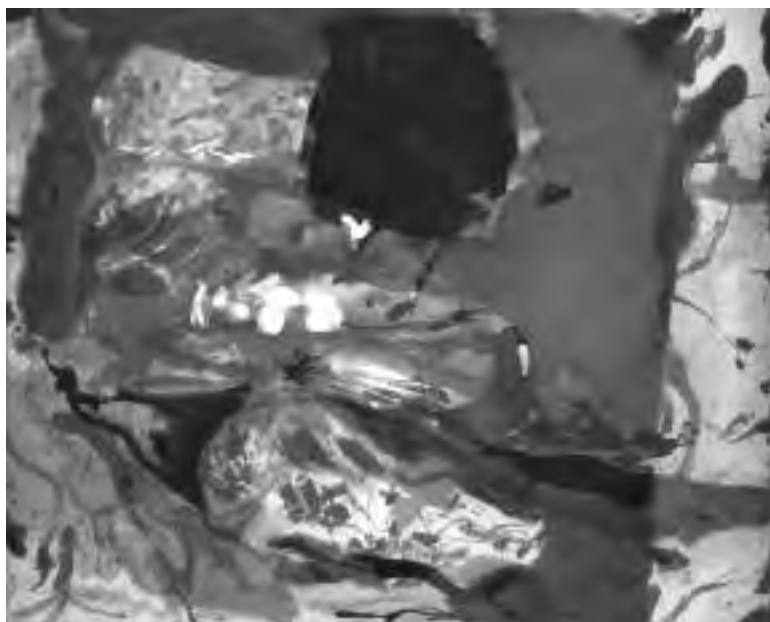


Fig. 9. Helen Frankenthaler, *Lorelei* (1956), oil on canvas, 70 5/8" x 86 3/4". The Brooklyn Museum, 58.39. Gift of Allan D. Emil.

between abstraction and representation. Her technique encouraged these multiple readings. The soak-stain painting permanently embeds paint into the canvas ground, creating a literal flatness. Yet, as John Elderfield explained about Frankenthaler’s most famous soak-stain painting, *Mountains and Sea* (Pl. 5), space is opened up in the ostensibly flat composition through the use of transparent pigment and the juxtaposition of warm and cool colors.⁴¹ Frankenthaler once characterized cubist space as “miles away but simultaneously right smack up front;” the description is just as appropriate for her own pictorial space.⁴²

Given Frankenthaler’s conflicted feelings about the role of gender in her work, and bearing in mind the milieu in which she painted, I see this sustained exploration of pictorial difference as, metaphorically, also a meditation on gender difference. Crucially, for a woman artist working in New York in the 1950s and early 1960s, any contemplation of gender difference had to be subtle to avoid risking being discounted as a serious artist. Materializing difference in pictorial ambiguity was less risky insofar as the painting’s gendered implications were veiled. Though her painting contemplated opposition, juxtaposition, and identification, Frankenthaler’s work could not be dismissed as “woman’s art” on the grounds that it explored difference in specifically gendered terms.

Ultimately, Frankenthaler was attempting to “think through” femininity in her art—to overcome her gender, seeking to replace her female/feminized presence with a gender neutral one, as Griselda Pollock argues. By actively engaging her beholder with pictorially ambiguous effects, as well as segmented compositions that must be read piecemeal, she extricated herself from her canvases, leaving only the viewer him- or herself, as many of the period’s most astute art critics intuited. Attempting to eradicate gender is still engaging it, and her protests notwithstanding, being a

woman mattered to Frankenthaler's art. However, as she acknowledged, it was just one element in a long list, though it was the first, perhaps—the thing to move through and beyond. Frankenthaler's attitudes toward her sex and her art may not conform to our thinking about gender today. But if we read the green painted footprint in *Madridscape* as indeed the ghostly trace of a woman caught up in the 1950s New York art scene, we have an opportunity to walk in Frankenthaler's shoes. We can imagine her trying to send gender stereotypes marching, as surely as that green footprint treads across the canvas. Frankenthaler fervently wanted to avoid the traditional roles permitted women in the studio—nude model, muse—even if, in the end, she had to banish part of herself to succeed. •

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NOTES

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1. See for example, Marcia Brennan, *Modernism's Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2004); and Lisa Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender, Identity, and New York School Painting," in Eric M. Rosenberg, *Friedel Dzubas: Critical Painting* (Medford, MA: Tufts Univ. Press, 1998), 9-24.
2. B.H. Friedman, "Towards the Total Color Image," *Art News* (Summer 1966): 32.
3. J[ames] S[chuyler], "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art News* (May 1960): 13. Schuyler compared the "feminine sensibility" he saw in Frankenthaler's retrospective at the Jewish Museum (Jan. 26 – Mar. 2, 1960) with the "remarkable shift" he saw in her new work at the André Emmerich Gallery (Mar. 28 – Apr. 23, 1960). In her new work, Schuyler saw more vivid color and form that seemed less improvisational, both of which implied a "new certainty."
4. A[nn]e S[eelye], "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art News* (Mar. 1960): 39, 57-58. Seelye's review of Frankenthaler's retrospective show at the Jewish Museum occasioned an outpouring of outrage by *Art News* readers. The April and May issues of the magazine, the first two to follow Seelye's March notice, published several examples of the many angry letters the editor had received. These writers seethed that Seelye's attack was inappropriate in its methods and wrong in its conclusions. The review was called "inept," "disgusting," "glorified dribble," a "gross insult," and an "unwarranted invasion of the artist's right of privacy." Seelye was chastised for her blindness, her vindictiveness, and an "excessive lack of taste." See "Editor's Letters," *Art News* (Apr. 1960): 10; (May 1960): 6.
5. Helen Frankenthaler, quoted in Henry Geldzahler, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," *Artforum* (Oct. 1965): 38.
6. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Art News* (Jan. 1971): 22-39, 67-71.
7. Griselda Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women: A Woman's Touch in the Cold Zone of American Painting in the 1950s," in Griselda

Pollock and Fred Orton, eds., *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1996), 220-94.

8. Helen Frankenthaler quoted in Cindy Nemser, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," *Arts Magazine* (Nov. 1971): 55.
9. Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women," 224.
10. Ibid.: "They had to stay near enough to the action to be part of it and grasp what was on offer. They had to make a space within which to make a difference, to make their own particular difference, which resulted from the whole complex of who each one of them was, while endlessly dodging the curatorial sniffing out of what would be deadly to their desire for recognition, the contaminating signs of a disqualifying 'femininity.'"
11. Nemser, "An interview with Helen Frankenthaler," 55.
12. Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women," 241-42, 244. Pollock draws on Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth Century Vanguard Art," *Artforum* (Dec. 1973): 30-39; reprinted in Duncan, *Aesthetics and Power* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993).
13. Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women," 242.
14. Ibid., 225, 227, 241-42.
15. Ibid., 241-42.
16. The critic Harold Rosenberg introduced his interpretation of New York School painting as "action painting" in *Art News* in 1952. Rosenberg understood the artists of the New York School, in particular Jackson Pollock, whose physical painting style had by then been documented in publications such as *Life* magazine, to consider the canvas "as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object." Rosenberg thus reasoned that what a New York School artist such as Pollock produced "was not a picture but an event." See "The American Action Painters," in David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, eds., *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 76. That "event," then, was not the making of a painting, but more a creative or originary act that materialized the emotional and intellectual energy of the painter. A primary difficulty of Rosenberg's account is that it casts the painting itself as something of an artifact of the painter's revelatory act. The interpretation thus seems to diminish the work of art in its attempt to theorize and valorize the artistic process.
17. Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women," 242.
18. Ibid., 242, 244.
19. Ibid., 242, 244, 250-51.
20. Ibid., 248.
21. Ibid., 247.
22. Ibid.
23. The ambiguity and juxtaposition of oppositions in the pictures are themselves contemplations and enactments of difference and differentiation. Moreover, difference motivates Frankenthaler's vision of her work as connecting discrete entities, the viewer and the painting, the subject and the world. (As much as the consonance between these entities matters, so too does their inherent distinctness from one another. If the entities were not distinct, then there would be nothing much of interest in juxtaposing them.) As Anne M. Wagner has argued, the differentiated, or ambiguous, contents of Frankenthaler's paintings can be understood as gendered. Wagner maintains that the "femininity" of Frankenthaler's painting is exactly its "thick and conflicted description." In other words, it is "feminine" in its maintenance of oppositions, its contradictions, and in how it links difference to the identity of the painter. The canvases juxtapose the separate incidents of Frankenthaler's "pleasures and frustrations" and the sedimentary layers of her "procedures and history." Moreover, the feminine ambiguity of Frankenthaler's painting exposes the feminine ambiguity

that usually goes unnoticed in Jackson Pollock's: aspects of his painting are also "descriptive, layered, unsynthesized, 'too personal,' contradictory, aiming at boundlessness, relentlessly tactile." See Anne M. Wagner, "Pollock's Nature, Frankenthaler's Culture," in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, eds., *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 196.

24. John Elderfield, *Frankenthaler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 122, 126.

25. For an account of beholder surrogates in phenomenologically oriented modernist painting, see Charles Palermo, "Tactile Translucence: Miró, Leiris, Einstein," *October* 97 (Summer 2001): 31-50.

26. Wagner, "Pollock's Nature, Frankenthaler's Culture," 191.

27. *Ibid.*, 192.

28. *Ibid.*, 190-94.

29. The Frankenthaler literature frequently identifies this shape in *Eden* as the "hand of God." Barbara Rose, for example, has written of "the big red hand of God at the top right..." (Barbara Rose, *Helen Frankenthaler* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972], 88). Arthur Danto, explaining Frankenthaler's tendency to "accept" pictomorphs (quasi-representation) in her ostensibly abstract paintings, has written that for those who insist on reading this biblically-named work representationally, the "red raised hand...has to be the hand of God saying STOP!" (Arthur C. Danto, "Helen Frankenthaler," in *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays & Aesthetic Meditations* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994], 28; originally published in *The Nation*, 21/28 August 1989.)

30. J[ames] S[chuyler], "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art News* (May 1960): 13.

31. P[aul] B[rach], "First Show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery," *Art Digest* (Dec. 1951): 18-19. Brach sees something fresh and daring in the work of this young artist. Frankenthaler "explores vital areas of abstract expressionism. Her frequent borrowing—from De Kooning, Gorky and

Pollock—is never that of discipleship. The motifs she takes serve as points of departure for her own explorations" (18). Frankenthaler's first solo show ran at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery Nov. 12–Dec. 3, 1951.

32. P[arker] T[ylor], "Exhibition at De Nagy Gallery," *Art News* (Jan. 1958): 20. This show ran Jan. 6–Jan. 25, 1958.

33. P[arker] T[ylor], "Exhibition at the De Nagy Gallery," *Art News* (Feb. 1956): 49. Also quoted in Wagner, "Pollock's Nature, Frankenthaler's Culture," 183. Frankenthaler's 1956 solo show was exhibited at the De Nagy Feb. 18–Mar. 8.

34. J[ames] S[chuyler], "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art New* (Feb. 1957): 11. This show ran at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery Feb. 12–Mar. 2, 1957.

35. F[rank] O[Hara], "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art News* (Dec. 1954): 53. This show was exhibited at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery Nov. 16–Dec. 4, 1954.

36. M[artica] S[awin], "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art Digest* (Dec. 1954): 24.

37. It is worth noting that the sentence structure of Sawin's review seems to imitate the liquidity and flow of Frankenthaler's paintings. The notice is written using only lengthy sentences, and the prose evokes stream-of-consciousness writing, itself a metaphor for the operations of the subjective subconscious.

38. Of the nineteen paintings included in the Jewish Museum retrospective, only the earliest, *Ed Winston's Tropical Gardens* (1951-52), was not a soak-stain painting, but rather mixed media on paper mounted on board.

39. D[onald] J[udd], "Helen Frankenthaler," *Arts Magazine* (Mar. 1960): 55.

40. B[rach], "Helen Frankenthaler," 18.

41. Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 67.

42. "A Conversation: Helen Frankenthaler with Julia Brown," *After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956-1959*, exhib. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), 32.

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WORDS OF EMPATHY

THE PRINTS OF LYNNE ALLEN

By Kit Smyth Basquin

Lynne Allen (b. 1948) is a master printmaker. Her powerful images represent the disadvantaged and marginalized, especially Native Americans, prisoners, the homeless, and animals that serve as metaphors for people. She uses words to deepen her message. For Allen, printmaking is a tool that serves her content, whether she is using traditional processes or newer, innovative forms such as three-dimensional prints and digital images. "I like printmaking because I can problem-solve," says Allen. "I problem-solve the human condition.... It's the internal frustrations and the internal dealings that people have to get through that intrigue me, how people cope."¹ Through works like *Colonial Colors* (1997–98; Fig. 1 and Pl. 6) she has crystallized her personal history, humanitarian concerns, and artistic vision.

Since 2006, Allen has headed Boston University's School of Visual Arts. Previously she spent almost two decades at Rutgers University, as a professor and at the Center for Innovative Print and Paper. Judith Brodsky, who hired Allen as the Center's master printer in 1987, believes that its "heavy emphasis and tradition of ideas and on content in art, especially narrative content" influenced Allen.²

Valuing content over form, in opposition to Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism, is a feminist characteristic that pervaded the 1970s. Although Allen does not identify with feminism—having been raised to have self-confidence—as with most women of her generation, she acknowledges that it undoubtedly influenced her.

Allen was born in Trenton, New Jersey. She started making etchings at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, where she graduated in 1970 with a degree in art education.³ "I always made work when I was teaching... but I never thought I'd make my living from it—that's what an artist was for me and my generation." Over the years, Allen has united her art-making with teaching and administration into a satisfying professional career.

After college, Allen volunteered to teach art to the visually and mentally impaired. Her empathy toward people she felt were being treated unfairly grew out of some difficult early childhood experiences. Allen favored particular subjects in her work based on feelings of trying to "understand on a human level, the suffering, the bad luck that happens to some people, and their ability to overcome adversity." Her awareness and appreciation for different points of view is quintessentially postmodern.

While completing a Master's degree in education at the University of Washington, she took printmaking classes and experimented with photo-silkscreen. Allen gravitated to printmaking because of the "scientific" aspect: "There's a messy part. There's a process part.... And there was a little bit of the explorer in me, wanting to figure things out, which printmaking is. It's not like painting—you put a mark, it does its thing."

After school, Allen worked in Europe, first in Norway and then in Holland, chairing the art departments at the American Schools at Stavenger and The Hague, respectively. Pulled increasingly toward printmaking, she took courses at the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague, and bought a tabletop etching press to work at home. Summers she traveled to printmaking workshops, including to the Banff Center in Canada for a lithography course with the master printer John Sommers, of the Tamarind Institute. Sommers, impressed by her large, dark, figurative lithographs, would be instrumental in Allen's decision to devote herself full time to printmaking.⁴ She returned to Holland, but when Sommers encouraged her to apply to Tamarind, she left her job mid-year and headed for Albuquerque, New Mexico. While waiting to hear whether she would be accepted, she took lithography courses at the University of New Mexico. She surprised herself at the risk she was taking—leaving a good job, leaving Europe, with no assurances. In the end, she was invited to Tamarind, and after completing a two year program was hired as a staff printer. In *Self-Portrait* (ca. 1980; Fig. 2), a two-color photolithograph from this period, Allen frames herself, Pop-art style, with U.S. International Revenue Documentary Stamps, smiling at her own insignificance, worth just two cents.

At Tamarind, Allen found working with other artists an important learning experience, especially seeing how different artists approached problems. Allen printed works by Joan Brown, Philip Pearlstein, and others. Former student Rodney Hamon, now educational director at Tamarind, noted that Allen's experience as a collaborative printer helped her learn to make art quickly, make fast decisions, and defend the ideas she produced.⁵

Allen entered the MFA program at the University of New Mexico, studying with Garo Antreasian, a former Tamarind-Los Angeles technical director. Allen describes Antreasian's influence as "pivotal," as a teacher who "pushed me intellectually and emotionally to produce." Typical of her

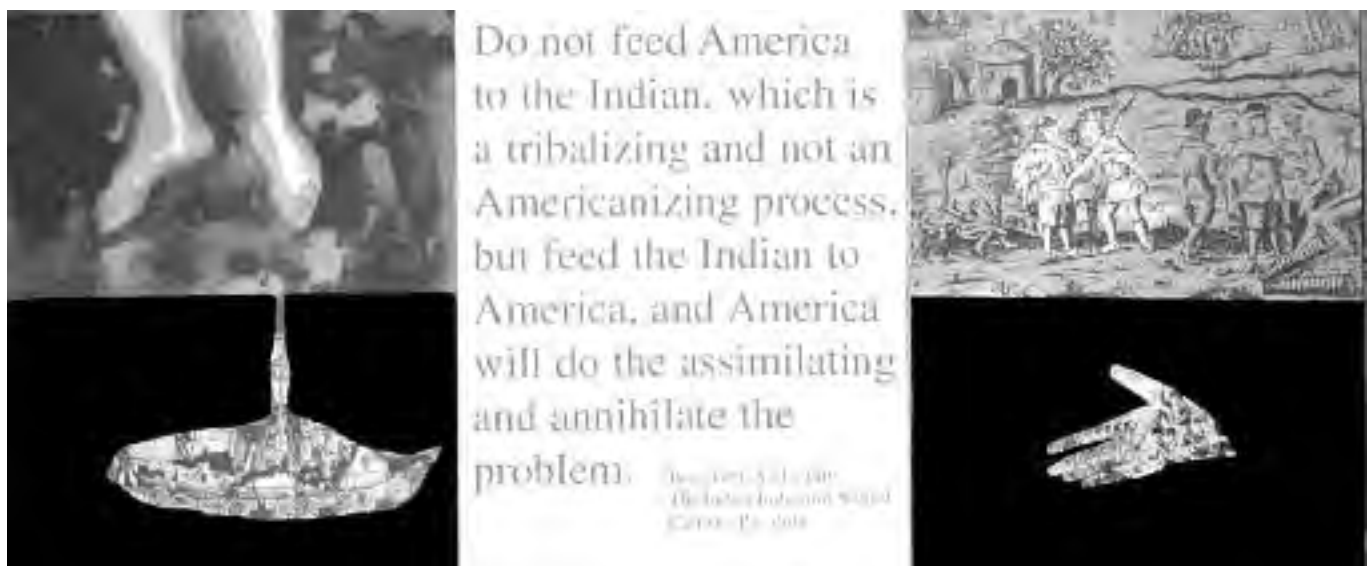


Fig. 1. Lynne Allen, *Colonial Colors* (1997–98), lithograph and silkscreen triptych, 30" x 60". Art and image © Lynne Allen.

work at this time were aggressive, figurative lithographs such as *Strong Arm* (ca. 1986; Fig. 3), which captures both the power and frailty in the repeated hand gesture of this formally dressed figure.

Then as now, Allen's subject matter was concerned with "how human nature can rise above misfortune." She says, "Humans are fighters." Allen describes her figurative style as "similar to Leon Golub's—a little bit aggressive—a little scary." The influence of Golub's brutal, bold images can be seen in Allen's prints such as *Captured* (c. 1986; Fig. 4), with its boldly outlined "victim" being dragged by one man as another protests, and the anger-filled *Argument* (c. 1986; Fig. 5). Allen has dispensed with Golub's realism, but like his confrontational images, they disturb, as she intends.

In 1987 when several of the works Allen had printed were included in a traveling exhibition of Tamarind prints, she accompanied the exhibition to Moscow and gave workshops as part of an exchange program with the Soviet Union of Artists.⁶ It was there she met her future husband, Sergei Tsvetkov, a master intaglio printer at "A House of Artists" in Senej, run by the union. Words began to enter Allen's prints, for example *Jail* (1989; Fig. 6), made during a return trip to Senej (about 35 km north of Moscow). Here the words "Dog" and "Attack" appear as labels for a dog and a prison guard, as a prisoner in stripes turns away in fear, reflecting Allen's concentration on complex psychological states. The words serve both as compositional elements and to intensify the brutality of the situation. Except for the stripes, Allen's simplified figures are almost indistinguishable, suggesting that *both* prisoner and guard are victims of a brutal society.

Shortly after her return from the USSR, Allen took the position at Rutgers. However, she returned to Moscow for two months in 1989 to work with other Soviet artists, and again the following year on a Fulbright Scholarship (the first visual artist on a Fulbright in the USSR). Her project was to further explore the psychological states of victims and disadvantaged people.

Concerned about "the Soviet pressure, the people's fear of the police," she said "I felt I could make prints about these sensitive issues, because I had the ability to leave and go back home to my life; they did not. Artists I met there didn't make images like that, or if they did, they disguised their real meaning."⁷

"Because I get most of my content and passion from things that I read, it was normal to actually put in words," Allen says. Initially, the text was minimal, but later "the words would steer the content... There is always irony somewhere in my text." In *Bound Up Hyena* (1995; Fig. 7), for example, the ironic title is also a compositional element—this silkscreen was printed at Moscow Studio, the only silkscreen atelier in Russia at the time. Her images were becoming more linear and less tonal, as in this stylized depiction of a hyena, alone, helpless, strapped on its back on a gurney. Below the image it reads: "Behind his back his friends said he laughed like a hyena." Written in crude, childlike script, the text calls to mind a characteristic of hyenas, which are brave in packs but fearful alone, a trait Allen also observed in many humans. Said Allen:

"These beasts are metaphors for human nature.... We project our own faults onto these animals. We see them in our terms. They become scapegoats for our sins. They're not unsavory in themselves... My work is generally about the negative side of human nature. We create underdogs and I'm taking the side of the underdog. Animals become innocent victims."⁸

As she often did, Allen was working out deep-rooted feelings of anger and frustration through visual metaphors.

The experiences abroad gave Allen a new perspective on her Native American heritage. As 1/16 Native American, she could not qualify for entry into the Sioux tribe of her ancestors but chose to look back at their history from the outside, hoping to inform—and disturb—viewers about injustices suffered.⁹



Fig. 2. Lynne Allen, *Self-Portrait* (c. 1980), two-color photolithograph, SIZE. Art and image © Lynne Allen.



Fig. 4. Lynne Allen, *Captured*, (c. 1986), lithograph, 40" x 30". Art and image © Lynne Allen.



Fig. 3. Lynne Allen, *Strong Arm* (c. 1986), lithograph, 30" x 40". Art and image © Lynne Allen.



Fig. 5. Lynne Allen, *Argument* (c. 1986), lithograph, 30" x 40". Art and image © Lynne Allen.

While an artist like Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, a registered tribal member, was creating a complex identity for contemporary Native Americans from the inside, Allen, saw herself in contrast to the Native women in her family who came before her.

"I grew up knowing all about the Native side of my heritage, much more than my father's side," Allen said. "My grandmother taught me things: how to dry corn, how to do beadwork, and a little bit of the Sioux language.... But because I didn't grow up on the reservation, right or wrong, I always felt I wasn't part of that culture. I had it as a 'hand-me-down.'" A visit with some Native American relatives in California intensified Allen's interest in the search for her roots, and she began incorporating American history from a Native point of view into her prints. Part of her motivation, Allen explained:

... was to reclaim it for my mother, who was long gone and never reconciled with her own hang-ups about being a "half-breed." Part of it was to give the heritage to myself as a right... and to give the legacy to my daughter. Part of it was to earn the right to own the allotment land I inherited from my mother. To lay claim to it physically, by going to South Dakota, and trying to connect to the collective memories of my grandmother and mother.

According to one observer, "Each revelation in understanding this Sioux portion of her heritage has enriched Allen's efforts

to illuminate the complexity of the psychological issues she finds within herself and ultimately within all humankind."¹⁰ In other words, by analyzing psychological connections with her family, Allen developed an understanding and empathy for victims of society and for herself.

Colonial Colors presents Allen's claim to Sioux culture as well as her understanding of the Native American plight. The central panel of this large lithograph and silkscreen triptych contains text addressing the U.S. government's annihilation of the Indian culture (and the Indians themselves):

Do not feed America to the Indian, which is a tribalizing and not an American process, but feed the Indian to America, and America will do the assimilating and annihilate the Problem.

*Brig. Gen. R. H. Pratt,
The Indian Industrial School
Carlisle, Pa. 1908¹¹*

In fact, these heartless sentiments about erasing Native American culture directly affected Allen's grandmother, who was then a student at the Carlisle Indian School, where Pratt was the superintendent. This text links the print to conceptual works of the early 1970s that showcased language as subject. Flanking the text are four images, two on either side. The floating feet and legs refer to anyone fleeing oppression, whether physical or psychological. The quadrant below the feet in *Colonial Colors* contains a paper boat, symbolizing the



Fig. 6. Lynne Allen, *Jail* (1989), etching, 19" x 23". Art and image © Lynne Allen.

European ships that brought the "invaders" to America. The upper right section shows a colonial white man and an Indian meeting on a hillside. The figures are arranged decoratively like a wallpaper design, suggesting that whatever treaty may have resulted from the meeting was mere "decoration," lacking substance.¹² The rewriting of Native-American history from a European American point of view enrages Allen:

There is so much about the history of the taming of the West that is inaccurate. The legacy of removal from their native lands, taking away their means of livelihood (hunting) by taking their guns, moving them to reservations, feeding them rancid meat, forbidding their language and religion realigned an entire culture. I have empathy for the unjust treatment and forgotten truths of that era. Not just because my ancestors were part of it and relayed the story, but because all societies have oppressed members.

Finally, in *Colonial Colors*, a disembodied outstretched hand, an open gesture of peace, with battle scenes printed on the palm is meant to remind viewers of the long history of disingenuous gestures toward Native Americans.

Allen also references the work of Nancy Spero (1926–2009), whom she admired on many levels. She balanced marriage to an artist (Leon Golub), children, fragile health, and a successful art career. Spero was an

independent artist who employed figures and words in her art when the mainstream was dominated by Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. An early feminist, she also was known for the serious content of work—murals, mixed media works and prints—and for attractive compositions that on close inspection deliver an aggressive punch. For example, at a distance a frieze of figures might appear decorative, but up close one sees the figures are engaged in some confrontational action. "You walk up because it's so gorgeous, with her beautiful paper-thin, skin-like paper, with these wonderful things going along. And then you get close and you see there's somebody with their tongue hanging out!" Although Allen's work is not as brutal as Spero's, it has the same decorative quality.

In *Fringed Bag* (c. 2001; Pl. 7), for example, what appears at first as a delicate pattern of figures seen up close is clearly violent, with red blotches and illegible handwritten text about the unfair treatment of Native Americans. Unlike Spero, however, who emphasized physical violence, Allen's focus tends to be on the psychological effects of mistreatment. And while Spero often painted, drew, and stenciled narratives on large works that surrounded the viewer like a cornice around a room, Allen is more interested in the printed medium itself, constantly experimenting with the printed surface. *Fringed Bag*, a hand-colored etching on deerskin with beadwork and a rusted antique clasp, mixes media and dimensions. The flat print is shaped into a three-dimensional bag, like those carried by Native Americans in the nineteenth century.

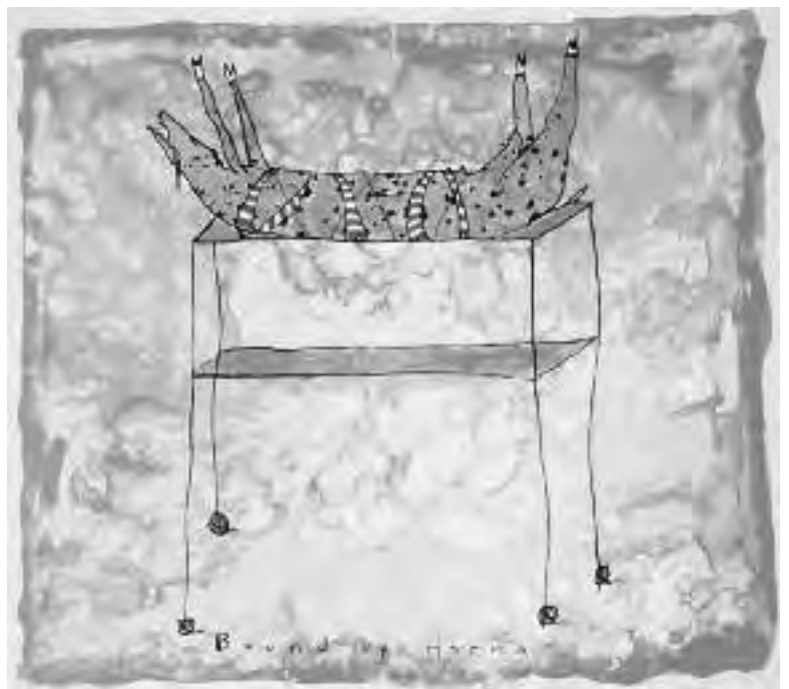


Fig. 7. Lynne Allen, *Bound Up Hyena* (1995), silkscreen, 30" x 36". Art and image © Lynne Allen.

Although Allen focuses on Native Americans, she believes that the same themes resonate wherever indigenous peoples are being mistreated, whether physically or economically. "These issues are what drive my work," she says. "Society always has a knack for oppressing someone." This treatment of vulnerable people dominates Allen's prints, linking them to painful emotional experiences as a child. Says Allen, "Art is supposed to make you think and to become more informed or better for it."

Allen's thematic concerns echo her approach to the printmaking process itself, writes Brodsky:

Her message requires a layering of information to reach a more complete reading. The complexity of the reading has a parallel in the very process of printmaking. The use of multiple plates for many of the intaglio images or the reused ghost images in the monotype process, the inclusion of applied paper during printing, as well as the varying transparencies of printing inks can subtly enhance the understanding of Allen's message as the eye/mind looks through each image.¹³

Because Brodsky calls printmaking "a thinking artist's medium," she suggests that the process of printmaking has facilitated Allen's way of thinking and working.¹⁴

Teaching and being in touch with students has motivated Allen to experiment with contemporary forms. In working with new media such as digital prints, three-dimensional prints, and even printing on packing blankets, Allen says she's discovered "a new freedom."

Prints give me flexibility, because they don't have to be two-dimensional; they don't have to be in an edition; they don't have to be anything other than what the medium is capable of doing. This allows for many combinations and mixing of mediums and ideas, which I find is very useful today, where most artists (not just print artists) are working this way. I also respond to the physicality and the feel of the materials, and to the ease with which I can make prints.¹⁵

When *Moccasin #2* (2000; Pl. 8), her one-off etching of Native American moccasins was exhibited in "Digital Printmaking Now" at the Brooklyn Museum in 2001, curator Marilyn Kushner described the artist's process as well as her tribute to her great-grandmother.

Lynne Allen reclaims her Native American maternal heritage in *Moccasin 2...* in ways made possible by digital technology. Allen traces her ancestry on her mother's side back six generations to her Sioux forebears. Her great-grandmother wrote a journal... Allen scanned parts of this journal..., manipulated some of the images, and then made prints out of the composition. These prints were fabricated into the moccasins, which are now an unusual combination of the work of Allen herself and of her great-grandmother,



Fig. 8, Lynne Allen, *Invasion* (detail) (2010), printing, stitching, and beading on packing blanket, 68 1/2" x 77". Art and image © Lynne Allen.

a kind of collaboration. As some other artists have done, Allen brings together the past and the present through digital resources.¹⁶

The moccasins, although a wearable size, are made from handmade paper. The unexpected print form calls attention to the object, and the text, which quotes Native American history, also memorializes her maternal ancestor.

Although Allen makes "prints about the social and political injustices which Indians have suffered rather than about [her] Indian heritage, per se,"¹⁷ in fact, she feels the personal connection deeply. Like Leon Golub once told Allen, although he might "subordinate the direct expression of his personal feeling to bigger issues he is still in all the work."¹⁸ The larger issue for Allen has been coming to terms with difficult memories from childhood; memories of hurt and frustration have manifested as empathy and an ability to put herself in another's position, to feel someone else's hardship.

Digital printmaking was the primary medium in *Wind Woman (Ita ta win)* (2006; Pl. 9), which incorporates a photograph of her great-great-grandmother. Like a palimpsest, this stoic portrait of Ita ta win over a map-like background layered with words from a diary bleeds through a pattern of red circles. These circles floating on the surface symbolize the smallpox brought by the Europeans that spread across the country and wiped out a vast percentage of the Native American population. The process for such a print is complex. She starts with a computer to scan and manipulate the images, and to lighten the surface to achieve the ghostly image—like a witness. She then combines intaglio-style woodcut with the digital images to add texture to the surface. The images are then transferred photographically onto etching plates, litho plates, or silkscreen. In the end, she prefers to "print from a traditional printmaking matrix," which gives "more depth and visual texture."¹⁹ By finishing with the old processes, in works like *Wind Woman*, where the soft forms dissolve into one another, she gains greater control over the look of the computer print.²⁰

Printmaking, exhibiting, teaching, and administration have been an interlocking pattern in Allen's life, and she continues to enjoy and move forward in each of these areas. Her ongoing experimentation with new media, materials, and techniques can be seen in works like *Invasion* (2010; Fig. 8). Made using a packing blanket with added stitching, beading, and stenciling, it refers to her own move to Boston but also to the tragic history of the removal of Native Americans ("at gunpoint") onto reservations. Here as elsewhere, her use of words is intended to reinforce empathy and to make the viewer reevaluate history.

Words, says Allen, represent history and power—whether they appear bold and confrontational, demanding the viewer's attention; or childish, suggesting vulnerability; or as the old-fashioned handwriting of Allen's great-grandmother (her "muse"). Words pull the viewer deeper into her content, into the history of Native Americans told from their point of view. "Exploring my Indian heritage has given me a way to express my feelings about the importance of living with a generous spirit," says Allen.²¹ At the same time, investigating this heritage has helped Allen to create a complex artistic identity in which to unite the past and present through her graphic presentations of words and images. •

Kit Smyth Basquin is Associate for Administration, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. She curated "Wording the Image/Imaging the Word: Prints by Pat Steir, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Lynne Allen, and Lesley Dill" (2010).

NOTES

Wording the Image/Imaging the Word: Prints by Pat Steir, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Lynne Allen, and Lesley Dill," opened at the Gallery of the College of Staten Island/CUNY (Sept. 27–Nov. 6, 2010), and moved to the Sherman Gallery, School of the Visual Arts, Boston University (Nov. 16–Dec. 19, 2010).

1. Lynne Allen, interview with author, Jan. 18, 2006, at Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. I thank Lynne Allen for her generosity in helping prepare this article. All unsourced quotations, notes, and details derive largely from this interview, supplemented by an earlier interview on July 31, 2004, and several subsequent email correspondences with the author during 2007 (Jan. 9, July 8, Sept. 11, Nov. 5), 2008 (April 6), and 2010 (June 6, Aug. 20).
2. Judith Brodsky, interview with author, Oct. 18, 2005, at Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. Allen was Director of the Center (later renamed the Brodsky Center for Innovative Print at Paper) during 2000–06.
3. Allen said, "My father made me get a degree in art education. He wouldn't let me get a BFA, because he said that if my husband left me, I wouldn't have to be a waitress. I'm not sorry that he did that... The early feminists, through their efforts, led the way for us to be self-sufficient."
4. Unfortunately no prints survive from this period.
5. Rodney Hamon, e-mail response to author's questions, January 9, 2007.
6. Allen and artist George McNeil gave workshops in Moscow, Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), and Tallinn, Estonia, after which two Soviet artists came to make prints at Tamarind.
7. Judith K. Brodsky, "Lynne Allen", *Contemporary Impressions: The Journal of the American Print Alliance* 8:1 (Spring 2000): 9. Allen revised her comments as quoted in the article in e-mail to author, April 6, 2008.
8. Judith K. Brodsky, "Lynne Allen," 6.
9. Her mother did not register her with the tribe as a child, when Allen could have been included.
10. Brodsky, "Lynne Allen," 10.
11. Pratt wrote about his educational policy in the January–March 1915 issue of *The Quarterly Journal of the American Indian*. Allen's grandmother graduated from the Carlisle school in 1910.
12. The image is based on Thomas Campanius Holm's frontispiece of *A Short Description of the Province of New Sweden*, 1702, which resides in the Library Company of Philadelphia.
13. Brodsky, "Lynne Allen," 10.
14. J. Brodsky, interview, Oct. 18, 2005.
15. Lynne Allen, interview for XIIth Tallinn Print Triennial (Tallinn, Estonia, 2001), See http://www.triennial.ee/vana/tgtintervjuud_allen_eng.htm.
16. Marilyn Kushner, *Digital Printmaking Now* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2001), 16.
17. Brodsky, "Lynne Allen," 7.
18. Ibid.
19. Allen, interview for XIIth Tallinn Print Triennial.
20. Allen's manipulation of the digital image calls to mind Jean Baudrillard's definition of simulacra, a duplicate without an original, as the manipulated image becomes. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1994), 19.
21. Brodsky, "Lynne Allen," 10.



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NIKI DE SAINT-PHALLE AND THE MASQUERADE OF HYPERFEMININITY

By Catherine Dossin

The creator of the colorful and playful Nanas, that are “neither intimidated nor repressed by their lives or by men,”¹ was Niki de Saint-Phalle (1930-2002). For her entire career, Saint-Phalle focused on the condition of women because, as she declared, she was a woman and so women’s problems were *her* problem.² Not only did her work address the difficulties and ambitions of women in the mid-twentieth century, her biography also embodies the struggles and transformations women underwent in the last century to solve their ‘problem.’ In fact, Saint-Phalle’s story reads like a textbook example of many women’s experiences during the heyday of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, from the plight of women as described by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)³ to their liberation through the women’s movement.

Catherine Marie-Agnès Fal de Saint-Phalle was born in the elegant Parisian suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, the second of five children of a French father and U.S.-born mother. When she was three years old, her parents moved to New York City, where she grew up among upper-class circles. The education she received at home and in Catholic school was typical of the time, aimed at developing girls into perfect wives and mothers. As she bitterly reminded Pontus Hulten later in her life, the only expectation her parents and society had of her was that she marry well:

My brother, John, was encouraged to develop his brain. Achievement as a possible choice for me was denied. I felt jealous and resentful that the only power allotted to me was the power of attracting men. It didn’t really matter whether I studied or not as long as I passed my exams. [...] My mother’s desire was that I should marry a rich and socially acceptable man.⁴

Behind the proper bourgeois façade of her life, there was the reality of an abusive father and the trauma of incest. Niki reacted by misbehaving, with a temper and strong will. At age eighteen, she escaped the “marriage market” for which she had been groomed by eloping with Harry Mathews, a childhood friend. Having broken free from her family and the suffocating desires and limits they placed on her, she found little fulfillment in her new roles as wife and—soon after—mother. Although she wanted to be an actress or writer, she supported her family by modeling for *Vogue* and *Life*



Fig. 1. Niki de Saint-Phalle, *Composition* (1956), oil on canvas, 74 7/8" x 51 1/8". Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

magazines. While her husband studied music at Harvard University, she cared for their daughter Laure, drew, wrote poems, and attempted to silence her growing dissatisfaction. In 1952, when the family moved to Paris so that her husband might further his musical studies, Saint-Phalle started drama classes. The following year, as her anguish became unbearable, she broke down and was hospitalized. During her institutionalization, she received a letter from her father



Fig. 2. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Le Château* (1956-58), oil and various objects on canvas, 76 7/8" x 51 1/8". © 2010 Niki Charitable Art Foundation. All rights reserved. Photo: Laurent Condominas.

apologizing for what he had done to her. As repressed emotions surfaced, she sank deeper into depression, finding solace only in her writing and drawing. In pages she covered with images, she also wrote about the feelings and memories that overwhelmed her, pulling together the scattered pieces of her broken life to slowly regain control of her story.⁵ Following her hospitalization, making art became more than therapy; it came to define her life, giving her the purpose and means to continue and start anew.⁶

Composition (1956; Fig. 1 and Pl. 10) exemplifies the work Saint-Phalle produced during this transitional phase. The painting displays a patchwork of colors and small vignettes that emulate the visual complexity of Gaudi's mosaics, which had entranced her when she encountered them in Barcelona in 1955. That same year she also visited Joseph-Ferdinand Cheval's *Le Palais Ideal* in Hauterives, France, and was deeply moved by the fantastic constructions of this self-taught artist. The composition, perspective, and brushwork of *Composition*, with its child-like qualities, were certainly influenced by Cheval's work. Saint-Phalle's unconventional artistic references demonstrate her irreverence vis-à-vis the art world



Fig. 3. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Saint Sébastien or Portrait of my lover* (1960-61), paint and various objects on wood, 28 3/4" x 21 5/8". © 2010 Niki Charitable Art Foundation. All rights reserved. Photo: Laurent Condominas.

of the 1950s, and her commitment to developing her own style—an attitude that would come to characterize many feminist artists in the 1960s.⁷

In fact, its style and iconography make *Composition* an example of proto-feminist discourse. In the upper right corner of the canvas, a dripping reddish sun shines over the garden of a majestic castle, which resembles the residence of the artist's maternal grandparents at Filerval, also depicted in *Le Château* (1956-58; Fig. 2). In *Composition*, a brown-haired girl has abandoned her red doll on the grass to play ball with a boy. At the bottom left, a dog with six legs sleeps on a pillow. Next to it, in a red classroom, a girl with long black hair writes "LAURE" (her daughter's name), on a blackboard while her classmates are seated around a yellow table. To their upper left, the bust of a teenage girl with long orange locks emerges from a black-and-white background. Her face is painted gray, and, despite the absence of facial features, we can feel her looking at us. A similar girl with orange locks appears in *Le Château*, which suggests that this figure is a self-portrait. The fiery hair likely represents the rebellious mind that earned her the nickname Niki, in reference to the Greek goddess of Victory. Above her, a larger vignette shows a carpeted bedroom with a table and flowers. On a bed in the center a

woman with long black hair has just given birth. The baby—a white stick-figure—lies between her open legs.⁸ The woman's body is painted brown, but her breasts are represented by two white circles. The choice of white certainly alludes to the presence of milk in the new mother's breasts—Saint-Phalle had recently given birth to her second child—and creates a visual connection to the child, while at the same time disconnecting the baby and breasts from the woman—symbolically disconnecting motherhood and womanhood. The woman's vertical orientation and pose, with her arms and legs extended toward the four corners of the bed, further suggests her victimhood on the altar of motherhood. To her left is a male figure whose hand reaches towards her breast. He might be the child's father, or possibly Saint-Phalle's. The space of the bedroom is delimited by a thick black line that repeats the rectangular shape of the bed and separates the room from the surrounding garden. The only way out is a flight of stairs, which leads to the door of the imposing castle. The woman is trapped in the bed, in the bedroom, by motherhood, in the house, and, finally, in the rectangular space of the painting.

At the right edge of the composition, a white snake wrapped around a tree oversees the various scenes. The snake reappears at the bottom right corner of the work, in what may be a representation of original sin: a dark-haired Eve, followed by Adam, bends toward a red snake with hypnotizing eyes, eager to commit the mistake that will plague woman ever after.⁹ With this symbolic addition, *Composition* moves beyond the autobiographical events that triggered its iconography to address woman's condition in general: the anguish of being physically and emotionally trapped and controlled; the impossible battle between the demands of motherhood and individual desire; the guilt and self-hatred bestowed on woman by the Judeo-Christian tradition used then by society to undermine and silence her.

In 1958, Saint-Phalle rented a studio in the famous Impasse Ronsin, where Brancusi had worked and where she applied all her energy to succeeding as an artist. As her own career dragged, her husband's reputation was growing—he had given up music in favor of literature and was publishing poetry (and soon after, his first novel). Whereas the other artists in the Impasse Ronsin virtually lived in their studios, she would leave at the end of each day for the family's comfortable, bourgeois apartment, to perform the roles of mother and wife. Saint-Phalle's frustration and rancor resulted in no small part from her inability to devote herself fully to her work. As the tension between these two worlds became increasingly difficult for her to handle, Saint-Phalle eventually



Fig. 4. Niki de Saint-Phalle, *Shooting*, parking lot on Sunset Strip Blvd., Los Angeles, March 4, 1962. © 2010 Niki Charitable Art Foundation. All rights reserved, Photo: © William Claxton.

felt compelled to choose. Interestingly, the impetus for her decision was inspired by another woman artist. She later recalled:

It was also at this time I met the painters Joan Mitchell and Jean-Paul Riopelle. I was mortified because Joan didn't take me seriously as an artist. For her I was a married woman who was painting, I didn't have a gallery so I wasn't a professional. Joan fired my ambition and my desire to prove myself to the world by treating me like the wife of a writer. I thought my paintings were just as good as hers and her painter friends, and I also wanted to prove them that I existed.¹⁰

In 1960, Saint-Phalle left her husband of eleven years and her two children. Abandoning her family was a distressing decision that she felt was forced upon her if she wanted to prove herself as a painter and a real professional.¹¹ From then on, she would devote herself only to her work. And as Saint-Phalle believed there were heretofore no real images of women, only those created by and for men,¹² she made it her redeeming mission to create artworks for and about women and their real, mostly painful experiences.

Having left behind her life as a mother and wife, Saint-Phalle became an important figure in the 1960s art world. Through the sculptor Jean Tinguely, whose studio was also in the Impasse Ronsin and with whom she later became romantically involved, she was introduced to Yves Klein, Arman, Daniel Spoerri, and Pierre Restany, artists who were then launching the Nouveau Réaliste attack on the European art world. The Nouveaux Réalistes loved the powerful assemblages of found objects that Saint-Phalle was making,



Fig. 5. Niki de Saint-Phalle, Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvelt during installation of *Hon* at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1966, fabric on wire frame, c. 240" x 113". © 2010 Niki Charitable Art Foundation. All rights reserved. Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm/Hans Hammar skjöld.

such as her *Saint-Sébastien* or *Portrait of My Lover* (1961; Fig. 3), a black panel with a dartboard and a man's paint-splattered shirt affixed to it with dozens of nails. The dartboard was a visual metaphor for both her desire to kill a lover and response to Jasper Johns's *Target* paintings; the drips of black paint that cover the shirt evoke both physical violence and Jackson Pollock's painting technique. Drawing on additional art historical references, the piercing nails recall images of voodoo practices in addition to those of the saint. A second version of this work was included in a February 1961 group show titled "Comparaison: Peinture sculpture" at the Musée de la Ville de Paris, where visitors could interact with the piece by throwing darts at it. That same month, Saint-Phalle staged the first of her *Tir* performances (Fig. 4) during which she would shoot a rifle at relief sculptures filled with paint, encouraging the audience's participation by inviting everyone present to fire at the work. These shooting performances were warmly received by the Parisian art world and consecrated Saint-Phalle as a Nouveau Réaliste—and the only Nouvelle Réaliste.

As a member of the group, Saint-Phalle exhibited her work at

prestigious venues traditionally closed to women artists. It appeared in shows such as "Bewogen beweging" (Art in Motion), organized by Pontus Hulten at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in March 1961, and "The Art of Assemblage," a traveling exhibition organized by Peter Selz, which opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that October.¹³ A year later, when Hulten organized the experimental exhibition "Dylaby" (Dynamic Labyrinth) at the Stedelijk Museum, Saint-Phalle shared the show with an otherwise all male cast of rising stars of the international art world: Robert Rauschenberg, Martial Raysse, Tinguely, and Per Olof Ultvedt. A decade later, in 1972, when the French government organized the large retrospective "Douze ans d'art contemporain en France," she and Sheila Hicks were the only women included.¹⁴

Saint-Phalle's bilingualism and biculturalism granted her a privileged position within the international avant-garde, allowing her to facilitate communication between artists in Europe and the U.S.¹⁵ In the early 1960s, she was instrumental in fostering exchanges between the Nouveaux Réalistes and the Neo-Dadaists. For example, in 1961 she helped Rauschenberg

and Johns, who were installing Johns's first European show, to overcome the language barrier. On June 20th of that year Tinguely, Rauschenberg, Johns, and Saint-Phalle performed in *Hommage à Tudor*, a ballet choreographed by Merce Cunningham and orchestrated by John Cage, at the American Cultural Center in Paris. In New York the following spring Saint-Phalle and Tinguely collaborated with Rauschenberg on *The Construction of Boston*, an extravagant performance in which Tinguely, dressed as a bride, built a cinderblock wall across the stage, while in the background, Rauschenberg activated a rumbling weather machine and Saint-Phalle fired at a plaster cast of the *Venus de Milo*. All the while, Henry Geldzahler, Frank Stella and Maxine Groffsky, acting as the artists' doubles, were reciting from a script by Kenneth Koch. The event was so chaotic that Cunningham finally refused to have his name associated with it, but it was nonetheless successful and a rare example of a postwar trans-Atlantic exchange.¹⁶

Saint-Phalle's position within the 1960s art world was also aided by her family's connections. She remained on friendly terms with her ex-husband, who introduced her to many American intellectuals living in Europe. Her sister Elisabeth was married to the American art dealer Lawrence Rubin, whose gallery was then in Paris and who brought her into contact with the New York scene. Lawrence was the brother of William Rubin, a curator at MoMA, and when in 1968 he organized the groundbreaking exhibition "Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage," Saint Phalle was one of three women included, along with Hannah Höch and Meret Oppenheim.

During these years, Saint-Phalle enjoyed a level of success and fame shared by very few women artists at the time. Attending the opening of her show "Feu a volonté" (Fire at will) at the Galerie J on June 30, 1961, were art world notables including Lawrence Rubin, Frank Stella, Leo Castelli, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, Pierre Restany, the Nouveaux Réalistes, and even Jean Fautrier. In 1966, when Pontus Hulten invited Saint-Phalle, Tinguely, and Per Olof Ultvelt to collaborate on a project for the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, the result was *Hon-en katedral* (*She-a cathedral*) (Fig. 5 and Pl. 11), a gigantic female figure lying on her back with her legs spread apart to welcome visitors inside her pregnant body, which had been carved into an entertainment center. Entering *Hon* through her sex, one could go down to a small art gallery located in her right thigh to see reproductions of modern masterpieces, or go up to the small movie theater installed in her left arm to watch a movie featuring Greta Garbo. Other attractions included a planetarium situated in her left breast, a milk bar in her right breast, a small moving brain in her head, and a terrace at the top of her swollen stomach from which one had a panoramic view of approaching visitors. Couples could retreat into her left calf to cuddle on a red velvet love seat, under which Tinguely had placed bugs, so that lovers' exchanges could be heard in another room.¹⁷ *Hon*, however, represented more than pleasure and entertainment—it was a temple, a cathedral, honoring female power. Saint-Phalle described *Hon* as: "a great fertility goddess reclining comfortably in her immensity and generously receiving thousands of visitors which she



Fig. 6. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Nana noire – upside down* (1965-66), paint and fabric on wire mesh, 59" x 41 1/4" x 42 1/2". © 2010 Niki Charitable Art Foundation. All rights reserved.

absorbed, devoured, and gave birth to again... She was the incarnation of the ancient religion of the Mother Goddess."¹⁸ In retrospect, *Hon* stands out not only as an early manifestation of the Great Goddess and a major moment in the history of installation art, but also as a milestone in women's history: a rare occasion, maybe the first, when two famous male artists and a star curator agreed to serve the artistic vision of a woman.

With such a life and body of work, one would expect Niki de Saint-Phalle to have embraced the feminist movement wholeheartedly and to have become one of its leading figures in the art world. Yet her relationship to feminism was fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence. While she insisted her art was concerned with women, she was never active in the women's movement and refused to participate in women-centered exhibitions.¹⁹ Such refusals were not uncommon among artists of her generation, who considered themselves artists and did not wish to segregate themselves as women artists, but in Saint-Phalle's case it seemed inconsistent. Her feminist stance seemed overall incoherent. On the one hand, she refused to follow the path society had mapped out for her



Fig.7. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Léto or La crucifixion* (c. 1965), fabric, paint, and various objects on wire mesh, 96 1/2" x 70". © 2010 Niki Charitable Art Foundation. All rights reserved. Photo: Laurent Condominas.

and shaped an independent identity for herself.²⁰ Yet, her public persona was antithetical to many feminists, as she appeared in press images as a sexy woman, wearing tight boots, wrapped in boas, and flirting with interviewers while claiming that manipulating men excited her.²¹

The ambiguity of her attitude created unease among the feminist community, which could never see her as a model or an inspiration, despite the obvious feminist qualities of her work and her commitment to women's cause. As a result, she remained at the margins of feminist art history, and only a surprisingly few feminist studies were written about her work before the mid-1990s.²² Although Saint-Phalle's own refusal may have caused this situation, other elements played a role.

Saint-Phalle's fame and success were likely responsible for her marginal position within the feminist project of the 1970s. Feminist art historians were taking it upon themselves to recover female artists whose names had been lost, while feminist art critics endeavored to promote the work of contemporaries whom male critics were neglecting. Not needing their assistance in promoting her work, Saint-Phalle's success thus excluded her from their agenda. Furthermore, since Hulten and Restany had already presented Saint-Phalle as a feminist and located her work within that discourse, there

was no need for feminists to "reclaim" her as one of their own.²³ There was so much to be done for other artists who enjoyed less recognition.

Another aspect of Saint-Phalle's career that may have contributed to the lack of early feminist engagement with her work is her association with Nouveau Réalisme and Neo-Dadaism, both eclipsed at the time in the U.S. by the rise of Pop art. The show that launched Pop art in the United States, actually titled "New Realism," opened at the Sidney Janis Gallery in November 1962. Janis had begun planning it a year earlier in Paris, after seeing Pierre Restany's "*La réalité dépasse la fiction: Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York*," which featured the American Neo-Dadaists along with European Nouveaux Réalistes. Janis offered Restany an American venue for his exhibition but then decided to replace the already famous Rauschenberg and Johns with American newcomers—Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, Tom Wesselmann, and Andy Warhol—who would soon be dubbed Pop artists. Nouveau Réalisme and Pop art thus appeared together on the New York art scene, and remained linked in the minds of U.S. viewers, even if they had little in common. Although Saint-Phalle was not included in Janis's show (interestingly, she is often remembered as having participated),²⁴ her work was then being featured in New York at the Alexander Iolas Gallery. The association—however mistaken—with Pop art once again brought Saint-Phalle's work outside feminists' scope of interest and may have garnered negative associations because of Pop art's frequent depictions of women as sex objects identified with consumerism.²⁵

Finally, Saint-Phalle's multiculturalism, which played an important role in her success within the art establishment, may ultimately have contributed to her peripheral position within the feminist community. Raised in the United States by parents who identified themselves as French, she settled in France in 1950, where she mixed mainly in American circles. In the 1960s, she traveled constantly as her work was featured in exhibitions in Paris, New York, Amsterdam, Stockholm, and elsewhere. By the mid 1970s, she was dividing her time between residences in Southern California and Tuscany, where she began building her *Tarot Garden* (1979-98) in the Italian countryside.²⁶ Throughout her life, Saint-Phalle was always on some level "a foreigner," who enjoyed the freedom of not being rooted in one country. However, having no national ties can be problematic for an artist when no country's art establishment—and in her case no feminist community—feels duty-bound to claim her.

Yet the main problem was certainly the seeming incoherence of her feminist stance and the ideological content of her work, which seemed also rather unfocused. On the one hand, her art appeared to deconstruct traditional images of womanhood by examining the roles society ascribes women (bride, mother, daughter, witch, whore, etc.) using an approach similar to Simone de Beauvoir's in the *Second Sex* (1949).²⁷ Yet, her Nanas, such as *Hon or Nana noire - Upside Down* (1965-66; Fig. 6 and Pl. 12)—with their large breasts, wide hips, full bodies, and small heads—appear like modern equivalents to

the prehistoric Mother Goddess, suggesting that Saint-Phalle's work participates in the Great Goddess discourse. What was the cause of Saint-Phalle's indeterminacy?

To properly understand her art and actions, we have to reconsider them in their historical context. Her sexy public persona in the mid 1960s must be approached in relation to the discourses available to women before the formulation of a coherent feminist discourse. In 1929, Joan Riviere identified one of the "scripts" available to successful women in her essay "Womanliness as Masquerade."²⁸ Riviere explained how one of her patients compensated for her success in performing a male activity with a very feminine attitude, in an attempt to dispel the threat she might pose to the traditional social structure by asserting that she was still just a woman. The model of the feminine masquerade is useful to understand Saint-Phalle's flirting and coquettishness.²⁹ Her masquerade, however, differs from Riviere's patient, for instead of the girlish, submissive attitude Riviere described, Saint-Phalle adopted an aggressively feminine stance—a masquerade of the *femme-fatale*.

Here the model of the "exceptional woman" may help explain Saint-Phalle's behavior. As Mary D. Sheriff successfully argued in her study of Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, historically, women artists could succeed only as exceptional women: Vigée-Lebrun was successful because she was exceptional, and she was exceptional because she was successful.³⁰ In France, I would argue, this phenomenon prevailed into the twentieth century and shaped Saint-Phalle's persona. In the French context, the "exceptional woman"—whether a writer, artist, or socialite—combined intelligence and wit with femininity and sexiness. The anxiety produced by her success was thereby displaced from her intellectual or artistic success onto her sexuality, enacted through a bold but feminine attitude of power over men. The more successful she was, the more feminine/sexy she became.

Saint-Phalle's public persona clearly follows this pattern. The first photographs showing Saint-Phalle at work date from February 1961, when she was living and working in the Impasse Ronsin, just after leaving her husband and children. Her hair is short and disheveled. She wears a pair of blue jeans covered with paint, a baggy sweatshirt, and heavy boots. It is hard to recognize the young woman who modeled for *Vogue* in these photos. Her transformation started with her first public success. For the opening of her solo show at the Galerie J in June 1961, she wears a floral dress and her hair is carefully coiffed. She is more feminine, but not yet glamorous. The real change takes place between the fall of 1961 and spring of 1962, during which she found success as an artist and became an international figure. The photographs of her first shooting event in the U.S., on March 4, 1962, show her wearing the white suit and black boots that became her trademark.³¹ Her hair is shoulder-length, and she is not just feminine, she is sexy. A photograph taken during the "Dylaby" exhibition that fall shows Saint-Phalle with her male colleagues: she assumes a masculine pose with her hands on her hips, as they look on laughing. In this photograph, the distinction of her femininity—her supposed "weakness"—is emphasized. She is

with them but not one of them. Saint-Phalle began donning feathers and a femme fatale attitude around 1965 or 1966, at the height of her success. Looking through photos of the artist, we can see her transformation, the more successful—and threatening—she becomes, the sexier she acts.

This attitude was not incoherent. The presumed inconsistency came not from Saint-Phalle's actions but from the perceptions of feminist critics. Feminist art criticism and art history are to a large extent an essentially Anglo-American project. Yet, from the time of her nervous breakdown in 1953 to her breakthrough in the mid-1960s, Saint-Phalle was living in France, and her woman-centric discourse was shaped by that context. Her "exceptional woman" masquerade follows the rules of French—not American—society, resulting in a culture gap between the artist and American art audiences. Saint-Phalle's appearance on the U.S. art scene coincided with the beginning of the feminist intervention in the art world. She was at the height of her success and, by extension, of her femme-fatale persona, a type of feminist attitude that was all but anathema to feminists in the United States.

Saint-Phalle was not the only French woman whose feminism was questioned and seen as incoherent in the United States. The reaction stateside to Simone de Beauvoir's love letters to Nelson Algren, or the dismay expressed at Julia Kristeva's writings on motherhood are examples.³² From a French point of view, there was no contradiction in these women's works and public personae. Beauvoir could be a serious philosopher, a feminist, and a "grande amoureuse." Likewise, Saint-Phalle could be a successful artist, feminist, and vamp. Their femininity actually gave them more credibility: in the French context, the masquerade of hyper-femininity was a political position—an effective counter-hegemonic and counter-patriarchal stance.³³

It is, therefore, important to reconsider Saint-Phalle's public persona and relationship to feminism in the context of French culture of the day. While in the United States the plight of women might be described as "a problem that had no name,"³⁴ in France the problem was more clear-cut, that legally, women lacked the same rights as men. French women had obtained the right to vote only twenty years earlier, in 1944; until 1965 married women could not have a bank account in their own name; and not until 1970 was a mother's legal authority recognized as equal to a father's. In France, women's emancipation was first and foremost a legal battle, fought by lawmakers and marked, for example, by the Law of July 13, 1963, which modified the legal status of married women, and the 1967 Law Neuwirth, legalizing contraception.³⁵ Even the campaign to legalize abortion was a juridical battle conducted by lawyers and doctors rather than a grassroots movement led by women with a feminist agenda, and while its legalization was a success for feminists, the rationale behind the law was not women's right to choose.³⁶

France had no equivalent to the U.S.'s women's movement. Rather, the French feminist movement emerged in the aftermath of the student riots of May 1968, and its first public meeting took place in 1970 at the University of Vincennes. The feminist movement represented a radical trend and was

confined within the academic world. Essentially, there were two tendencies in France, both deeply rooted in Marxist theory: the Mouvement de Libération de la Femme (MLF)³⁷ considered the problem of women in terms of class struggle; and Psychoanalyse et Politique (Psych et Po) sought to resolve women's problems through a rewriting of the unconsciousness and symbolic order.³⁸ The latter tendency, though known in the U.S. as French feminism, was never a large-scale movement. French women who belonged neither to the Communist party nor to the Academy—Niki de Saint-Phalle among them—could not identify with the MLF or Psych et Po. The former was too revolutionary and the latter too intellectual. French women could be committed to feminist ideals and even work actively to improve women's conditions without being part of a larger movement. If Saint-Phalle's ambivalence toward the feminist movement starts to make sense when contextualized, the apparent incoherence of her artistic discourse may also vanish when her work is examined through the lens of her personal story rather than feminist theory. Saint-Phalle's work swings between existentialism and essentialism. As mentioned earlier, there seems to be a gap between her early assemblages, which deconstruct the female condition, and the Nanas, which glorify female specificity. *Crucifixion* (1963-64; Fig. 7 and Pl. 13) is typical of the former: it is a large wall sculpture of a female figure, symbolizing sacrifice at the altar of motherhood. The figure's small head—representing her mind and individuality—disappears in the middle of a huge torso made of artificial flowers, fruits, plastic babies, crouching figures, and other aspects of female nurturing. On the left, below the breast, a black horse tries to break free but is restrained by a red thread that ties the little figures to the rest of the body. On the right shoulder, four masculine faces emerge uncannily from this feminine mass. The crucified woman wears a pink garter-belt, panties, and fishnet stockings, but there is nothing glamorous about her. With curlers in her hair and her legs spread apart to show her dark and furry sex, she is sexually available but not sexy. In this work, sex is just a reproductive function, as the small babies crawling on the lining of the garter-belt clearly indicate.

In contrast to this cynical and crude female representation, *Nana noire - Upside Down* is more elegant, with a lighter touch. Instead of a garter belt and stockings, she wears a swimsuit. The plastic babies have been replaced by a pretty floral pattern. The harsh social commentary about a woman's sexuality and destiny has been sidelined by a glorification of femininity in the body of a modern female goddess. What happened in the brief intervening years? Did Saint-Phalle's understanding of womanhood as a social construction fall out of favor, with a notion of celebrating female identity taking its place? Again, I believe the problem lies not with Saint-Phalle's work, but rather with our approach, through the dichotomy of essentialist/non-essentialist ideas about womanhood. Such a radical distinction not only limits our understanding of works that were created outside predetermined categories; it also imposes a U.S.-based discourse on works that were developed in another cultural context.³⁹

Whereas in the United States the discourse on women was

polarized between essentialist and non-essentialist positions, in France there was more discussion of the problem of redefining womanhood. When Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote "on ne naît pas femme, on le devient" (One is not born, but rather becomes a woman), she meant and was understood to be saying that "woman," as society defined her, was an unsuitable construction that needed to be redefined independently from the definition of men, because women should not just be the *Other* of men.⁴⁰ The question for French feminists—and for French feminism, for that matter—was not whether there is a female essence but, rather, what should be the new definition of "woman." In this process of redefinition, the female body would play an important role, because it is the source of women's specific experience. Likewise, myths such as the Great Goddess and the primitive matriarchy could shape future womanhood. In France, the essentialism/non-essentialism argument was irrelevant.⁴¹

The difference between *Crucifixion* and *Nana noire - Upside Down* should be read not as a swing between non-essentialism and essentialism, but rather as a development from the deconstruction of traditional womanhood to the construction of a new woman, as a reflection of Saint-Phalle's personal journey from breakdown to breakthrough.⁴² Only in the French context do her Nanas reveal their full meaning: beyond being naïve, decorative sculptures, they offer a new model of womanhood as liberated and strong. The silhouetted female figure of the 1956 *Composition* has broken free from the limits imposed on her and she is now dancing freely; as her full breasts and wide hips affirm, she has freed herself without renouncing her feminine specificity. With her Nanas, Saint-Phalle created a woman who did not need to choose between her children and her work, a woman who could have it all. Nana is the beautiful dream of a woman whose inner life was nearly crushed by social pressures.

Beyond the specific question of Saint-Phalle's feminist stance and the constrictive influence of the essentialist/non-essentialist dichotomy, I believe that lack of acknowledgment of cultural differences is a limiting factor in feminist art history. Dominated by a particular cultural frame of reference, it cannot do justice to an artist like Saint-Phalle, who, though American as well as French, was a product of feminist discourses shaped by a different context. Herein lies a problem not limited to feminist art history but one that applies to our discipline overall: the dismissal of cultural differences even within the Western world, involving a tendency to lump together artists without noting their cultural particularities—as if there were just one Western history of art, just one version of feminism.

Ultimately, my goal is neither to assert a greater feminist significance for Niki de Saint-Phalle's art nor is it to criticize art historians. Rather, I wish to draw attention to a bias in our discipline and to call for a more careful examination of historical and cultural differences within the Western World, especially when it comes to women like Niki de Saint-Phalle, whose life and work—and especially her feminism—can be misunderstood and misrepresented when placed in the wrong context. •

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Notes

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1. Quoted in Gloria Emerson, "Jean Shrimpton Beware! 'Nanas' of Paris Are After You; Female Statues Are Exultant and Active," *The New York Times*, October 25 1965, 39.
2. See Anne-Marie Vilaine, "Mieux que les hommes," *Nouvel Observateur*, October 13 1965.
3. In the late 1950s, Betty Friedan started surveying female college graduates. The results of the survey showed that most of them had become housewives and were secretly dissatisfied with their lives. Using the data she had collected, Friedan wrote the *Feminine Mystique*, in which she exposed the guilty ill-being of those women, who felt trapped in roles society claimed to be the most fulfilling and natural to women but which did not satisfy them. See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963).
4. Quoted in Pontus Hulten, ed. *Niki de Saint Phalle* (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1992), 149.
5. Saint-Phalle was hospitalized in the South of France, like Vincent van Gogh and Antonin Artaud before her.
6. "Ich wurde Künstler, weil es für mich keine Alternative gab – infolgedessen brauchte ich auch keine Entscheidung zu treffen. Es war mein Schicksal. [...] Ich umarmte die Kunst als meine Erlösung und Notwendigkeit." ("I became an artist because for me there was no alternative. In a way, I did not have to decide. It was my destiny. [...] I embraced art as my redemption and necessity." [my translation]) Quoted in Carla Schulz-Hoffmann, ed. *Niki de Saint-Phalle: Bilder - Figuren - Phantastische Gärten* (Bonn: Prestel Verlag, 1987), 46.
7. Evolving as she did among the international cognoscenti, she was necessarily familiar with the art world and its accepted canon, and her rejection of it must be regarded as a conscious decision.
8. This detail strikingly recalls Jean Dubuffet's 1944 oil *L'Accouchement* (MoMA, New York). It is unknown whether Saint-Phalle ever saw this painting, but we can assume that she was aware of Dubuffet's work. He was an important figure in the Parisian art world and an active supporter of the type of naïve art she enjoyed.
9. This interpretation of *Composition* rests on the examination of a later work, a large 1963 assemblage titled *King Kong* (Moderna Museet Stockholm), whose iconography and symbolism are easier to understand. At the left of the assemblage, Saint-Phalle has represented a boy and a girl playing ball, a woman giving birth, and a bride and a groom; above the bride we can clearly see a snake slithering in a tree, and next to it a church.
10. Niki de Saint-Phalle, "Dear Jean," in P. Hulten, ed. *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 155.
11. "I was almost thirty years old and I loved my family dearly. Yet I felt there was no other way for me to exist than to devote my life entirely to my art." Quoted in Lilli Foldes, "Sculptress of Joyful Giants," *Reader's Digest*, February 1989, 58-63.
12. "Nobody was paying attention to us. No woman was ever doing what it was like for woman, no woman was doing a woman giving birth. We only had images of men throughout history. It was very important for me that it was a woman who was doing this." Quoted

in Jo Ortel, "Re-creation, self-creation: a feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint Phalle" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 1992), 204.

13. The exhibition went on to the Dallas Museum of Contemporary Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
14. A measure of the exceptional dimension of Saint-Phalle's visibility in the 1960s can be taken if one considers the statistics compiled by Ferris Olin and Catherine C. Brawer for 1970-85 in "Career Markers and Individual Milestones," in *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970-85*, ed. Catherine C. Brawer and Randy Rosen (New York: Abbeville, 1989), 203-36.
15. In the post-War period, most of the Americans who went to Paris did not speak French and so had little contact with their French colleagues who did not speak English. Individuals like Georges Mathieu, who was fluent in English and worked for a U.S. company, and Pierre Restany, who was fluent in Italian and English, could bridge language barriers, and Niki de Saint-Phalle played a similar role between the Neo-Dadaists and the Nouveaux Réalistes.
16. For a detailed account of this collaboration, see Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 187-98. Pontus Hulten, ed. *Paris-New York* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1977), 142-57. In the same catalogue see also Alfred Pacquement, "La première exposition de Rauschenberg à Paris, à la galerie Daniel Cordier, mai 1961," in *Paris-New York*, ed. Pontus Hulten (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1977), 580-83; and Pontus Hulten and Billy Klüver, "L'hommage à New York de Jean Tinguely, MOMA 1960," in *Paris-New York*, ed. Pontus Hulten (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1977), 570-79.
17. For more information on this project, see Niki de Saint-Phalle, "Hon," in Pontus Hulten, ed. *Jean Tinguely. A Magic Stronger than Death* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 166-69.
18. Quoted in *ibid.*, 166, 168.
19. Uta Grosenick wrote, for example, that Saint-Phalle "refused to be part of numerous exhibitions and publications devoted exclusively to women artists, and also did not make any pictures available for this book." Uta Grosenick, *Women Artists in the 20th and 21st Century* (Cologne: Taschen, 2005), 293.
20. "Remember, I was a person in rage against the patriarchal society, against what roles I was told to assume. I was brought up for the marriage market. I was born in 1930. I was a very pretty girl. I was supposed to marry a specific kind of person, very rich, etc. – all kind of things that were supposedly normal for me to do, expected of me. And I rebelled against all this. I wanted to be me. I also felt that men's world was much more interesting than women's world, that we were forced to have a much more circumscribed world." Quoted in J. Ortel, "Re-creation, self-creation: a feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint-Phalle," 168.
21. See for example her interview in *Vogue* magazine: Maurice Rheims, "Niki de Saint-Phalle: l'art et les mecs," *Vogue*, February 1965.
22. See, for example, J. Ortel, "Re-creation, self-creation: a feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint-Phalle." Abbie Gail Edens, "Niki de Saint-Phalle's Tarot Garden: A quest for the female Identity" (Master's thesis, Univ. of Louisville, 2002). Jill Carrick, "Phallic Victories? Niki de Saint-Phalle's Tirs," *Art History* (2003). The latter is derived from Carrick's PhD dissertation, which examines the concept of fetishism in Nouveau Réalisme: "Le Nouveau Réalisme: fetishism and consumer culture spectacle in post-war France" (Ph.D. diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1998).
23. Over the years, Pontus Hulten became Saint-Phalle's official historiographer and critic. It would hardly be an exaggeration to talk about Hulten's monopoly over the theorization and contextualization of her work.
24. In his memoirs, Arman, for instance, mentions Saint-Phalle as one of

- the artists featured in the show with him. See Otto Hahn, *Arman, Mémoires Accumulées. Entretien avec Otto Hahn* (Paris: Belfond, 1992), 66.
25. Here the paintings of Tom Wesselman and Mel Ramos paintings come to mind.
 26. For more information on this project, see the website devoted to Saint-Phalle's Tarot Garden at: <http://www.nikidesaintphalle.com/>.
 27. In the second part of the *Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir examined the different stages of a woman's life and the different functions society could assign her: wife, mother, lover, prostitute, etc. Such a typology of female roles is very similar to the typology found in Saint-Phalle's works. See Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).
 28. Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade (1929)," in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 35-44.
 29. I thank Joanna Gardner-Huggett for suggesting this interesting connection.
 30. Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997).
 31. Niki's white catsuit and black boots bring to mind the character Emma Peel played by Diana Riggs in the British TV series *The Avengers* in 1964. Dr. Cathy Gale, who played Honor Blackman in the same series from 1962 to 1964, wore a black leather suit and fought back but did not play with her femininity like Miss Peel. Peel and Saint-Phalle are assertive females with fighting skills who are also sexy.
 32. See, for example, Lillian S. Robinson, "Before The Second Sex," *The Women's Review of Books* XVI, no. 7 (April 1999): 1, 3-4.
 33. Brigitte Bardot is another example of hyper-femininity as a feminist stance. In France, the sulfurous actress was indeed seen as a symbol of women's emancipation from the narrow limits Catholicism and the patriarchal order imposed on them.
 34. B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.
 35. For more information, see the section devoted to women's equality in the website of the Ministère du Travail, des Relations Sociales, de la Famille, et de la Solidarité et de la Ville: <http://www.travail-solidarite.gouv.fr/espaces/femmes-egalite/>.
 36. The Loi Veil, which legalized abortion in France was voted on January 18, 1975. For more information on feminism in France, see Claire Duchén, *Feminism in France From May'68 to Mitterrand* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 49-66.
 37. The name 'Mouvement de Libération de la femme' was subsequently copyrighted by the members of Psycho et Po, even though it was more suitable to the revolutionary activities of the first tendency.
 38. See C. Duchén, *Feminism in France From May'68 to Mitterrand*, 27-47.
 39. See, for example, Barbara Jones, "Ain't gonna let Her in: Niki de Saint Phalle," *Women's Art Magazine*, September-October 1995, 14-15. Who argues that the debate between essentialist and non-essentialist is problematic for artists like Saint-Phalle, whose work exists outside the debate. I go further and argue that this distinction excludes artists who function outside the US as a theoretical frame.
 40. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 267.
 41. See Christine Delphy, "The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move," *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995): 190-221. Delphy writes that enthusiasm in the U.S. for the so-called French feminism was in fact a way to reintroduce the female body and experience within the U.S. feminist discourse.
 42. "I think women are living in a very difficult period today. They have lost their real power. [...] I don't know what's going to happen, but women are going in a new direction, and they haven't yet found the solution." Quoted in Suzy Patterson, "Our Girl in Paris: Artist Expresses Feminist Revolt," *Journal Herald*, October 9 1965, 26.

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CONSIDERING FEMALE AGENCY

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN AND FRANCESCA WOODMAN

By Marian Bleeke

A famous image from the now-lost Rupertsberg manuscript of Hildegard of Bingen's (1098-1179) visionary work known as the *Scivias* shows Hildegard herself in the act of producing both the manuscript's text and its images (c. 1165; Fig. 1 and Pl. 14). She dictates the words that form the basis for its text to her assistant Volmar, who records them on a tablet, while she sketches the forms that are the basis for its illuminations on a tablet she holds in her lap. As this image was also presumably based on one of Hildegard's designs, it offers a likely self-portrait of a medieval woman as an author and as an artist.¹ Compare this image to a 1972 photograph (Fig. 2) by a very young Francesca Woodman (1958-81). Woodman herself sits towards the back of the photograph, holding onto a shutter release cable that traverses the image space. She has presumably pulled the cable in order to produce this image, and so it presents a self-portrait of a woman as an aspiring artist. Beyond their general conceptual similarity as self-portraits, furthermore, the two images share a striking detail that inflects both of their presentations of female artistic agency; like the tongues of flames that descend from above to touch Hildegard's head, face, and eyes, tousled locks of hair obscure Woodman's face even as she presents herself to our gaze.

I owe the pairing of Hildegard of Bingen's illuminations with Francesca Woodman's photographs to Madeline Caviness's foundational feminist scholarship on medieval art, although this particular pairing of



Fig. 1. Hildegard of Bingen, from the Rupertsberg *Scivias* (Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek, Ms 1) (c. 1165). Photo: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 2. Francesca Woodman, *Self-portrait at 13* (1972). Boulder, CO. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman.

self-portraits is my own. In her 2001 *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages*, Caviness compares two of Hildegard's images from the Rupertsberg *Scivias* with Woodman's photographs; a female figure with its head dissolved in a stream of light to the figures with masked heads in Woodman's 1980 Temple Project series, and a narrative image of the birth of Antichrist from *Ecclesia* (Fig. 3) that shows the female personification with a monstrous genital mask to an untitled 1976 photograph of Woodman's that also features a mask over the woman's genitalia (Fig. 4).² According to Caviness, these images speak to the potential significance of bodily fragmentation and re-assemblage as strategies that can block the objectifying male gaze and so allow for the reconstruction of female subjectivity.³ Caviness's claim for the significance of these two pairs of images, however, raises questions concerning the possibilities for and limitations on women's artistic agency, both in the Middle Ages and in the modern world. This article focuses on the issue of female agency through strategic comparisons of aspects of the lives and works of Hildegard of Bingen and Francesca Woodman and argues that the similarities between them demonstrate these women's common struggle to realize themselves as agents within the very different terms provided by their two distinct social worlds.

Hildegard of Bingen's identification as an artist is largely due to Caviness's scholarship. In a series of articles published in the 1990s, she attributed to Hildegard the design of the illuminations in the Rupertsberg



Fig. 3. *The birth of Antichrist from Ecclesia* from the Rupertsburg Scivias (Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek, Ms 1), c. 1165. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 4. Francesca Woodman, *Untitled* (1976). Providence, RI. . Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman.

Scivias manuscript as well as a set of designs for her *Liber divinatorum operum* that lay behind the illuminations in the Lucca manuscript of that work.⁴ Although Caviness's argument for Hildegard's identification as an artist has not been universally accepted among medieval art historians, I do not challenge it here.⁵ Rather my concern is for the larger consequences to be drawn from that identification. Indeed, Caviness herself seems to have been unsure of what consequences to draw from her own argument: in certain articles she claims that Hildegard ought to be recognized as a "great master" comparable to Renaissance masters such as Leonardo da Vinci, but elsewhere she writes that as a "post-modern feminist" it is impossible for her to make such a claim.⁶

The difficulty Caviness encountered in assessing the larger significance of Hildegard's identification as an artist presents a version of a long-standing tension in feminist art history that was classically enunciated in Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Is the project of feminist art history primarily that of recovering the artistic work of women and then constructing a canon of female "masters" to match the existing roster of men? Or should women's experiences with art be used to challenge existing notions such as the great master and so to transform art history as a discipline?⁷ This tension has special relevance for feminist scholars who work on the Middle Ages, for the general anonymity of medieval art and the accompanying lack of documentation for its production means that we typically know little about the makers of the material we study—whether men or women. Medieval art is simply not a good fit for models of art historical inquiry that place emphasis on the person of the artist. As Rachel Dressler has written, the

importance of such a model in contemporary feminist art history is demonstrated by the most recent of the anthologies edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, in which fourteen out of twenty-three essays focus on women artists.⁸ The impetus for this emphasis is suggested by the anthology's title, *Reclaiming Female Agency*; for if female agency is the central concern of contemporary feminist art history, as Broude and Garrard suggest in their introduction to this volume, then that agency can most easily be identified in the work of women artists.⁹ Worryingly for medievalists, as Dressler points out, none of the essays in this volume addresses medieval materials.¹⁰ This absence of medieval art from a major contribution to the field suggests a perceived irrelevance, on the part of non-medievalist scholars, of medieval materials to feminist art history's key concerns.

This perceived irrelevance of the medieval past to contemporary feminism is not limited to art history, furthermore, but is a larger issue across the historical disciplines. In an important book, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, Judith Bennett identifies the root cause of this perception in a tendency to understand the medieval past as simply the antithesis of the modern world. At one

point in the development of feminist scholarship, such antithetical thinking produced a picture of the Middle Ages as a golden age for women. However, further scholarship showed this to be an inaccurate picture of women's place in the medieval past, and so, Bennett writes, the Middle Ages have come to be perceived instead as a "wretched abyss"—and why study the abyss?¹¹ The perception of the Middle Ages as an abyss for women, furthermore, impacts upon the issue of female agency that Broude and Garrard identify as central to contemporary feminist work in art history in particular. For Bennett also identifies a tendency in much feminist scholarship to understand women living in patriarchal societies, such as that of the European Middle Ages, as simply the victims of patriarchy and so as lacking in agency.¹² Such a perceived lack of agency on the part of medieval women could even seem to be confirmed by our lack of documentation for their artistic work. These perceptions, finally, can be seen as driving Caviness's interest in identifying Hildegard as an artist, for she thus becomes the great exception to the medieval rule as a well-documented female artist and agent.

To combat perceptions of the Middle Ages as simply the antithesis of the modern world and so as irrelevant to contemporary feminist concerns, Bennett argues for considering deep-rooted continuities between the medieval past and the present day.¹³ Bennett is careful to point out, however, that continuity is not the same as identity and so concentrating on continuities does not mean erasing any sense of historical difference. Instead, she calls for conceiving of a more complicated relationship between past and present, one that moves beyond seeing the past as entirely other to the present, or as simply the same, and instead allows for difference and likeness to co-exist.¹⁴ Her formulations are strikingly similar to the medievalist and queer-theorist Carolyn Dinshaw's concept of "contingent" history as a history in which past and present touch on one another, establishing partial connections between now and then, us and them. In a contingent historical relationship, the past in its partial connection to the present speaks to present-day concerns, but speaks in a different voice, and so can deepen and complicate our understanding of those concerns.¹⁵

By bringing together Hildegard of Bingen and Francesca Woodman in this article, I mean to create such a contingent relationship that speaks to the issue of agency that is central to contemporary feminist art history. I hope to show that medieval material is relevant to contemporary feminist work in the discipline in that it can deepen and complicate our



Fig. 5. Hildegard of Bingen, *Ecclesia* from the Rupertsburg *Scivias* (Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek, Ms 1) (c. 1165). Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 6. Hildegard of Bingen, *Synagoga* from the Rupertsburg *Scivias* (Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek, Ms 1) (c. 1165). Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

notions of agency. Bennett writes that women living under patriarchy, including medieval women, ought not to be conceived simply as passive victims of that structure but instead as its survivors, resisters, and even as its agents, as they found ways to live within its constraints and so became invested in it.¹⁶ Medieval women, including Hildegard of Bingen, as I demonstrate in the following paragraphs, were agents, but their agency was both socially constructed and deeply conflicted. This picture of agency conflicts with that enshrined in the notion of the artist as a great master, as described by Nochlin, as someone possessed of a natural genius that exists outside of social constructs and constraints.¹⁷ In comparing aspects of Hildegard's life and work to aspects of Francesca Woodman's, I intend to call attention to social construction of agency in general and to the continuing conflicted nature of female agency in particular.

In her latest statement on Hildegard, Caviness presents her in relationship to both medieval patrons and artists and contemporary women artists (including Woodman), and explores both relationships to help explain Hildegard's significance. According to Caviness, contemporary women artists have agency; they choose how to present their own bodies in order to represent their own experiences. Medieval



Fig. 7. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Tower of the Church* from the Rupertsberg *Scivias* (Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek, Ms 1) (c. 1165). Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

women did not have similar agency, for most medieval images, including most images of women, were the products of male patrons and artists. Hildegard, Caviness claims, stands as an exception to that rule as the producer of her own images, and so her work bears comparison with that of some contemporary women.¹⁸

Caviness's presentation of Hildegard as an exceptional medieval female artist/agent is problematic because it conflicts with Hildegard's self-presentation. In her writings, for example, Hildegard presents herself as exceptional precisely in that she is *not* an agent; she is speaking and writing not on her own behalf but as a mouthpiece for God.¹⁹ This exceptionality without agency also appears in Hildegard's self-portrait in the Rupertsberg *Scivias* manuscript. The red flames that descend to touch her face mark her as an exceptional being. The flames, which represent her prophetic gift from God, stimulate her activity within the image, motivating both the words she speaks to Volmar and the images she sketches on her tablet. As represented in this image, neither text nor image is Hildegard's own product; instead both are the result of the divine force that has chosen her and acts through her.²⁰ In her writings, furthermore, Hildegard associates her lack of agency with her femininity in order to further accentuate her exceptionality. She repeatedly describes herself as a "weak woman" and so as someone who would be incapable of producing her works on her own. These statements are consistent with a Christian logic of overturning, in which God chooses the weak, the inferior, or the lowly to be exalted: so he has chosen her to be his instrument. They are likewise consistent with her descriptions of herself as uneducated and even illiterate, which again identify her as inferior and as someone who could not produce her texts herself. As Sabina Flanagan and Barbara Newman both write, the "weak woman" statements also suggest that Hildegard had internalized medieval gender constructions that identified femininity with weakness.²¹

Also problematic is Caviness's presentation of Francesca Woodman as an empowered female and even feminist artist. The self-portrait that I compare to Hildegard's was made in 1972, when Woodman was only thirteen years old. Her genital mask photograph was made when Woodman was about eighteen, and the Temple Project series that Caviness discusses dates to 1980, when she was almost twenty-two. These photographs are therefore not

the work of a mature woman nor of a mature artist. Indeed, most of Woodman's extant work dates to her years as a student at the Rhode Island School of Design (1975-78), and critics have remarked that much of her work appears to be solutions to set problems.²² Her oeuvre is limited to this early and experimental work because she took her own life in 1981. None of this information is included with Caviness's presentation of Woodman's work.

Today's scholars and critics have struggled to understand both Hildegard's denial of her own agency and Woodman's suicide. The two are comparable in that suicide can be understood as the ultimate denial of one's own agency as it removes the self from the world: how are we to understand such acts of self-denial? In her biography of Hildegard, Sabina Flanagan argues that we must accept Hildegard's self-presentation as a mouthpiece for God as a genuine expression of her self-understanding.²³ Caviness, on the other hand, contests Hildegard's denial of her own agency, seeing it as a conventional monastic humility topos, or possibly as a deliberate rhetorical strategy necessary for her to write and create art within the church milieu.²⁴ In the case of Woodman, Chris Townsend and Carol Armstrong have expressed concern that overemphasis on Woodman's suicide has served to pathologize her photographs. However, Peggy Phelan has the opposite concern, that Woodman's suicide has been downplayed in order to rescue her as an empowered female/feminist artist.²⁵ I believe that Hildegard's denial of her own agency and Woodman's suicide may ultimately reflect each woman's internal struggle: Hildegard's to understand herself and her experiences within the constraints of medieval culture, and Woodman's to find her place in the world. By examining selected images by Hildegard and Woodman, I hope to illuminate how their shared visual interests in the female body and architectural forms speak both to their similar struggles and to ways in which those struggles were shaped by their different worlds.

The female figures that appear in Hildegard's illuminations are typically personifications, most often of Ecclesia (the Church) and of Synagoga (the Synagogue). Paired female figures of Ecclesia and Synagoga have a long history in medieval art, from early Crucifixion ivories to the sculptural programs of Gothic cathedrals.²⁶ Hildegard's versions of these common images are unusual, however, in her apparent use of their femininity as a means to identify herself with them and, in particular, to identify herself with the powerful institution of the Church.

Hildegard's female personifications appear as immense forms that dominate their frames, whether within narrative images such as the birth of Antichrist from Ecclesia or as iconic forms as in her visions of Ecclesia (Fig. 5) and Synagoga (Fig. 6). As Caviness writes, the figures' sheer size expresses Hildegard's sense of their power.²⁷ In their iconic forms, both Ecclesia and Synagoga's enormous bodies contain other, smaller bodies. In the Ecclesia vision reproduced here, the Church elevates a group of virgins (monks and nuns) in her arms. Among these virgins is one prominent individual, Virginitas herself according to the text of the *Scivias*, whom Caviness identifies as another self-representation of Hildegard.²⁸ This figure stands at the center of the Church's body and repeats the larger figure's orans gesture with her own arms; she thus appears as the Church in miniature lodged within the heart of the Church. Accepting Caviness's claim that this is indeed Hildegard, the image shows Hildegard using her femininity as a means of connecting herself to larger ideas and powerful forces. This strategy conforms, in part, to Hildegard's self-portrait, in which the flames serve to connect her to a powerful force outside of herself. Her femininity operates differently in these two examples, however; for if her femininity allows her to identify herself with the powerful form of the Church, it also forms part of her denial of agency through her claim to divine inspiration. Thus Hildegard portrays her femininity as a source of both strength and weakness.

The appearance of Ecclesia and Synagoga as bodies enfolding bodies identifies them as maternal forms. According to the *Scivias* text, Ecclesia is the "Mother of the Faithful," and Synagoga the "mother of the Incarnation of the Son of God."²⁹ This aspect relates to Hildegard's disembodied image of Eve in the Rupertsberg manuscript as a white cloud filled with stars holding "within her body the whole multitude of the human race."³⁰ The Church as a body full of bodies—a maternal body—also resonates with a second form used in the *Scivias* to represent the Church, the "Tower of the Church" (Fig. 7), which appears toward the end of the text as part of an elaborate architectural allegory for salvation history.³¹ This inhabited architectural environment presents another version of the Church filled with bodies and so a maternal form. Hildegard's identification of these powerful female figures as maternal bodies suggests that motherhood was, for Hildegard, a source of female power. To return to the Ecclesia illumination discussed in the previous paragraph, Caviness's identification of the prominent virgin as Hildegard herself suggests that by presenting herself as a body within the body of the Church Hildegard was identifying herself as a daughter of this



Fig. 8. Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, (1979). New York, NY. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman.

powerful mother. At the same time, as this virgin's form replicates that of the Mother Church, Hildegard seems to claim for herself the identity of the powerful mother.³²

In the *Scivias*, however, Hildegard consistently portrays maternal figures as endangered. The Church as Mother is attacked by some of her own children, who "abandon the maternal womb and the sweet nourishment of the Church and trouble her with many errors, and with different oppressions tear to pieces her laws."³³ Likewise, the Church as a tower is under attack, for some "act insane...burst into the building; they invade the tower, carrying on and hissing at it like serpents."³⁴ Synagoga, too, despite the power suggested by her size, is in trouble: she is black from her navel to her feet because she has been "soiled by deviation from the Law and by transgression of the heritage of her fathers"; her feet are red because she "killed the Prophet of Prophets and therefore slipped and fell down herself"; she has no eyes because she is blind to the truth; and her hands are tucked into her armpits because of her laziness.³⁵ In Hildegard's vision of Adam and Eve as well, a massive black shape looms over the tiny white cloud that represents Eve and expels its blackness onto her. The corrupted maternal body of the Church finally takes the form of the monstrous genital mask representing Antichrist that tortures her body before exploding away from her.³⁶ This image of the Church as a battered woman is one that Hildegard shared with certain of her contemporaries, in particular with Rupert of Deutz, who used it to call for church reform.³⁷ Hildegard's use of this image, however, can also be read as expressing her understanding of her own femininity and its consequences: if femininity as motherhood is a source of power, it is also a source of danger to the mother herself.



Fig. 9. Francesca Woodman, *House #4* (1976). Providence, RI. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman.

The female body that appears in much of Francesca Woodman's work is her own, similar to the identification suggested in Hildegard's illuminations between the female producer of the image and the female figure within its frame. However, where Hildegard's personifications served to connect her with powerful forces outside of herself, Woodman as artist and model is entirely alone within her images, in a self-constructed, private world. Woodman's images in general conform to her early self-portrait in which she represents herself as cut off from her surroundings by her own hair, as isolated within herself.³⁸

Caviness saw Woodman's self-imaging as a powerful move, as the female artist seizing control of the means of production in order to reformulate her own image and so her own subjectivity. That reading is not borne out by an examination of Woodman's oeuvre. While some of Woodman's photographs depict her body in extreme close-up and so in a fragmented form, others show her full figure inside of a frame (1979; Fig. 8), in a form more closely comparable to Hildegard's iconic images of *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga*. Hildegard's narrow rectangular frames conform to the shapes of her figures, however, so that they dominate their frames in a display of size as power. Woodman's square format extends the space of her photographs outward from her figure, thus reducing its size and stature within the frame.

This 1979 photograph also demonstrates Woodman's efforts to identify her body with the surrounding space and so to dissolve herself into that space. As Margaret Sundell writes, the patterns in Woodman's clothing correspond to the mottled

surface of the wall behind her; she has cut open the back of her dress to expose her body beneath it, much as the wall has cracked open to reveal its inner structure; and the fish skeleton she holds against her back serves to externalize her spine in juxtaposition with the building's exposed support system.³⁹ In other photographs Woodman blurs the boundaries between her body and its environment by other means; covering herself with fragments of wallpaper, for example, or manipulating the exposure so that she seems to gradually disappear into the wall behind her. Depicting herself as isolated, minimized, marginalized, and in the process of disappearing, Woodman's self-imaging is anything but powerful.

This photograph also shares with Hildegard's illuminations the use of architecture as a metaphor for the female body, although the two artists use this relationship to different ends. Hildegard's powerful female figures are containers, bodies full of bodies, and her use of the body/building relationship extends this idea of the container to her image of the Church as a tower, which is likewise filled with other forms. By contrast, Woodman's body as it appears in her photographs is uncontained in that she blurs its boundaries by identifying it with the space around it. She uses the body/building relationship to further her own dissolution, for not only does her body appear to dissolve into the surrounding space, but that space is also in the process of dissolution. Woodman's *House* series has elicited some feminist readings of Woodman's work that associate her setting in a house with oppressiveness because of the traditional association of femininity with domesticity.⁴⁰ However, as Carol Armstrong notes, the house that appears in Woodman's photographs is far from an ordinary domestic environment: it is quite clearly an abandoned and almost ruined structure.⁴¹ Woodman's photographs establish an analogy between her body and this blasted building. In another image in this series (1976; Fig. 9), Woodman crawls in between the fireplace mantel and the wall behind it, thus insinuating herself into the house's gaps and holes. Her spread legs echo the form of the mantel so that its open center suggests a vagina, and in this way she once again dissolves her body into the architecture by identifying even her innermost forms with its exterior space, even as that exterior space is falling to pieces. If Woodman is dissolving herself into her environment, that environment is likewise dissolving all around her.

As containers, finally, Hildegard's female bodies and buildings were maternal forms—both powerful and endangered. Jui-Ch'i Liu argues that Woodman's apparent desire for self-dissolution and merger with the space around her should be seen as a daughter's desire for reunion with the maternal body.⁴² Liu's argument is, first, a response to feminist readings of Woodman's work as expressing fear at the loss of the self into a traditionally feminine domestic sphere. Liu recognizes that the emotional content of Woodman's repeated self-dissolution is not fear but desire, "an active longing and positive

struggle to merge," in Liu's words.⁴³ Secondly, Liu's argument is built upon Surrealist identifications of the abandoned house as a metaphor for the womb, as the human subject's former home, and on Woodman's apparent interest in Surrealism. (Her first exhibition was shown in the Maldoror bookshop-gallery in Rome, which specialized in Surrealism, and she frequently reused established Surrealist iconography.⁴⁴) Liu's argument can be extended by recognizing that Woodman's dissolution into the surrounding space in her photographs is extended by the dissolution of that space itself; if her self-dissolution expresses her longing for merger with the maternal body, the dissolution of that space expresses the impossibility of realizing that desire—for the mother too is disappearing and so there is nothing stable for her to merge with.

Neither Hildegard of Bingen's illuminations nor Francesca Woodman's photographs were creations ex-nihilo; both used imagery from their culture, whether the Ecclesia and Synagoga personifications in Hildegard's work, or the Surrealist iconography of the abandoned house (and the terms of common art school assignments) in Woodman's. Their work can be compared in that both used these common types of imagery toward the end of self-representation, so that their work clearly demonstrates the social construction of the self in and through imagery.⁴⁵ Both artists' works also show signs of internal conflict. Hildegard's representations of Ecclesia as both powerful and endangered point to an ambivalent understanding of her own femininity as simultaneously a source of power and a site of weakness. For Woodman, the struggle was to find some other way of being in the world, as a self merged with the world as with the mother. Woodman's suicide is understandable as the final means for her to realize this desire. As Peggy Phelan writes, how can we not see her images in relationship to that final act, her repeated visual self-dissolutions as "rehearsals" for her final act of self-destruction?⁴⁶

The comparisons I have drawn in this article between Woodman and Hildegard, have led me to a new understanding Woodman's final act. By linking Woodman's work and this aspect of her life with Hildegard's images and experiences, Woodman's suicide becomes something other than an individual, anomalous, and inexplicable act. Instead, I can see it as part of a common and continuing struggle, the struggle of being a woman in the world, and that allows me to empathize with her. Linking Woodman's photographs with her suicide does not pathologize her work but gives meaning to her death by allowing it to be seen as part of that larger struggle. Likewise, the comparisons drawn here give me a different way of understanding Hildegard of Bingen, for linking her with Woodman makes her work and experiences seem less exceptional. I have to wonder how many other medieval women struggled similarly to understand themselves and their experiences using the resources provided by medieval culture, but did so without leaving textual or visual traces. Rather than being the great medieval exception as a female artist/agent, I prefer to see Hildegard as a model of medieval women's common struggles for self-understanding, struggles that we can compare to our own. •

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Notes

1. For this interpretation of Hildegard's activities in this image, and for the image understood as a self-portrait, see Madeline H. Caviness, "Anchoress, Abbess, and Queen: Donors and Patrons or Intercessors and Matrons," in June Hall McCash, ed., *Women's Literary and Artistic Patronage in the Middle Ages* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996), 115-17; Caviness, "Gender Symbolism and Text Image Relationships: Hildegard of Bingen's Scivias," in Jeanette M. Beer, ed., *Translation Theory and Practice in the Middle Ages* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Inst. Publ., 1997), 87; Caviness, "Artist: 'To See, Hear, and Know all at Once,'" in Barbara Newman, ed., in *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998), 112, 115; and Caviness, "Hildegard as Designer of the Illustrations to her Works," in *Hildegard of Bingen: The Context of her Thought and Art* (London: Warburg Inst., 1998), 29, 31.
2. Madeline H. Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle, and Scopic Economy* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 170-71, figs. 78, 79.
3. Ibid., 131-33, 153-55.
4. The Rupertsberg Scivias manuscript (Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek, Ms 1) disappeared from Dresden during World War II and is now represented by a copy made in the Abbey of St. Hildegard in Eibingen during 1927-33. Caviness makes a distinction in her argument between Hildegard's direct involvement with the Rupertberg Scivias manuscript illuminations and a more distanced and mediated relationship to the Lucca *Liber divinorum operum* images (Biblioteca Governativa, Ms 1942). See "'To See, Hear, and Know all at Once,'" 112-13, 121-23; and "Hildegard as Designer," 30-1, 34-8.
5. See Lieselotte E. Suurma-Jeltsch, *Die miniaturen im "Liber Scivias" der Hildegard von Bingen: Die Wucht der Vision und die Ordnung der Bilder* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert, 1998); and Keiko Suzuki, *Bildgewordene Visionen oder Visionserzählungen: Vergleichende Studie über die Visionsdarstellungen in der Rupertsburger "Scivias"-Handschrift und im Luccheser "Liber divinorum operum" – Codex de Hildegard von Bingen* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998). Caviness responds in her review of books on Hildegard, "Hildegard of Bingen: Some Recent Books," in *Speculum* 77/1 (Jan. 2002): 113-20.
6. For the first position see Madeline Caviness, "Hildegard of Bingen: German illustrator, writer, and Musical Composer," in Delia Gaze, ed., *Dictionary of Women Artists* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), 686, and "To See, Hear, and Know All at Once," 124; and for the second "Hildegard as Designer," 41-42.
7. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists" in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 145-48.
8. Rachel Dressler, "Continuing the Discourse: Feminist Scholarship and the Study of Medieval Visual Culture," in *Medieval Feminist Forum* 43/1 (2007): 19.
9. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, "Introduction: Reclaiming Female Agency" in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005), 1-3.
10. Dressler, "Continuing the Discourse," 15, 20. By contrast, Whitney Chadwick includes a chapter on medieval art and a section on Hildegard of Bingen in her survey text, *Women, Art and Society*, 3rd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 43-66, esp. 59-62.
11. Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 37-39, 43, 82-84.

12. Ibid., 10-11, 59-60.
13. Ibid., 60-83.
14. Ibid., 43, 125-26.
15. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1999), 12-21, 34-36, 39-54.
16. Bennett, *History Matters*, 10-11, 59, 76.
17. Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists," 153-56.
18. Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages*, 136.
19. Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), 2-3, 34-35, 82-83, 246-47; Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179): A Visionary Life* (London: Routledge, 1998), 4, 13-14; Barbara Newman, "Sibyl of the Rhine: Hildegard's Life and Times," in Newman, ed., *Voice of the Living Light*, 6-7; and Constant Mews, "Religious Thinker: 'A Frail Human Being' on Fiery Life," in Newman, ed., *Voice of the Living Light*, 52, 89.
20. On authority issues in Hildegard's text and self-images, see Lynn Staley Johnson, "The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe," in *Speculum* 66 (1991): 823-24.
21. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 2-3, 35, 182-85, 239, 246-47; Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 13-14, 42, 53-54.
22. See for example, Rosalind Kraus, "Francesca Woodman: Problem Sets," in *Bachelors* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 161-77; George Baker, Ann Daly, Nancy Davenport, Laura Larson, and Margaret Sundell, "Francesca Woodman Reconsidered," in *Art Journal* (Summer 2003): 59; Chris Townsend, "Scattered in Space and Time," in *Francesca Woodman* (London: Phaidon, 2006), 8.
23. Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 183-84, 203.
24. Caviness, "Anchoress, Abbess, and Queen," 11; and "To See, Hear, and Know All at Once," 124.
25. Townsend, "Scattered in Space and Time," 8; Carol Armstrong, "Francesca Woodman: A Ghost in the House of the 'Woman Artist,'" in Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher, eds., *Women Artists at the Millennium* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 350-51; Peggy Phelan, "Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time," in *Signs* 27/4 (Summer 2002): 979-1004, esp. 983-85.
26. See, for example, Nina Rowe, "Synagoga Tumbles, A Rider Triumphs: Clerical Viewers and the Furstenportal of Bamberg Cathedral," in *Gesta* XLV/1 (2006): 15-42.
27. Caviness, "Anchoress, Abbess, and Queen," 115; "Gender Symbolism and Text Image Relationships," 83; and "Hildegard as Designer," 32.
28. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 201-10; Caviness, "Hildegard as Designer," 40.
29. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 133, 169.
30. Ibid., 77. On similar imagery in Hildegard's hymns to the Virgin Mary see Bruce Wood Holsinger, "Flesh of the Voice: Embodiment and the Homoerotics of Devotion in the Music of Hildegard of Bingen," in *Signs* (Autumn 1993): 100-02.
31. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 451, 455; on Hildegard's use of architectural imagery see Caviness, "To See, Hear, and Know All at Once," 118-22.
32. Bruce Holsinger identifies Hildegard's relationship to female figures, in particular the figure of the Virgin Mary as appearing in her music, as one of homoerotic desire: Holsinger, "Flesh of the Voice," 116-22.
33. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 196.
34. Ibid., 452, 461-63.
35. Ibid., 133-34.
36. Ibid., 493, 498, 507-08.
37. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, "Prophet and Reformer: 'Smoke in the Vineyard,'" in Newman, ed., *Voice of the Living Light*, 78-84.
38. On Woodman's dual role as both artist and model see Armstrong, "Francesca Woodman," 353; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Just Like a Woman," in *Francesca Woodman: Photographic Work* (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Museum, 1986), 19-21; Harriet Riches, "A Disappearing Act: Francesca Woodman's Portrait of a Reputation," in *Oxford Art Journal* 27:1 (2004): 98-99.
39. Margaret Sundell, "Vanishing Point: The Photography of Francesca Woodman," in Catherine de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 436; see also Phelan, "Woodman's Photography," 993.
40. Sundell, "Vanishing Point," 435; Solomon-Godeau, "Just Like a Woman," 31; and Helaine Posner, "The Self and the World: Negotiating Boundaries in the Art of Yayoi Kusama, Ana Mendieta, and Francesca Woodman," in Dawn Ades, ed., *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 169-70.
41. Armstrong, "Francesca Woodman," 350.
42. Jui-Ch'i Liu, "Francesca Woodman's Self-Images: Transforming Bodies in the Spaces of Femininity," in *Woman's Art Journal* (Spring/Summer 2004): 26-31.
43. Ibid., 26.
44. Ibid., 26-27; on Woodman and Surrealism, see also Solomon-Godeau, "Just Like a Woman," 19; Riches, "A Disappearing Act," 100-02; and Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Dialogue and Double Allegiance: Some Contemporary Woman Artists and the Historical Avant-Garde," in Ades, ed., *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*, 146-51.
45. Solomon-Godeau, "Just Like a Woman," 19; Riches, "A Disappearing Act," 100; Suleiman, "Dialogue and Double Allegiance," 129-33; and Kraus, "Francesca Woodman," 162, 165, 172-73.
46. Phelan, "Woodman's Photography," 985-1002.

The Journals of Grace Hartigan 1951-1955

edited by William T. La Moy and
Joseph P. McCaffrey
Syracuse University Press and Syracuse
University Library, 2009

Reviewed by Robin Rice

For anyone interested in this artist's life or work, *The Journals of Grace Hartigan* is fascinating on several levels and essential reading. Many will be intrigued by the journals' evocation of a time and place—four years in the middle of the twentieth century in New York City—now legendary in the history of American painting. This was the era when painting was regarded as the indexical modern art form and New York City was the undisputed center of painting innovation and production. It was also the time when Hartigan (1922-2008) found a way of working that would remain the nexus of her practice and establish her reputation as an original and historically significant painter. The journals are pithy, literate cultural and social documents.

Their immediacy adds an element of human drama. The brief entries deal with Hartigan's work life and her immersion in a social and professional milieu that ranged from important first generation New York School abstractionists like Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock to second generation New York School painters like Hartigan herself, Joan Mitchell, and Larry Rivers. Her circle included poets, especially Frank O'Hara, curatorial leaders such as Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, and important critics, notably Clement Greenberg. Hartigan's intimate point of view affords informal glimpses of these personalities and the way art business was conducted, impressions unmediated by hindsight. In addition to her own thoughts, she recorded provocative passages of others' writing, especially autobiography and poetry.

The entries are predominantly concerned with her professional and creative life. She speaks more often about paintings and the act of painting than about people. "[W]hen the fire (of



Fig. 1. Grace Hartigan, *Grand Street Brides* (1954), oil on canvas, 72" x 102". Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo: Geoffrey Clements.

the desire to paint) is burning nothing else matters," she writes on May 23, 1953 (8). This obsessive, intentional focus on painting, characteristic of New York artists of her day, was a choice that Hartigan felt she must make to be the best painter she could be.

She wrote not for posterity or another reader but primarily to analyze her own work. "Reading over my old journals trying to capture my old depression as Jim S. [Shuyler] says in a poem. What I'm trying to do is get some articulate ideas about where I'm going, what I'm doing." She concludes in this passage, however, that perhaps journals can't help her because she is "an instinctive painter" who must "see it through blindly" (Oct. 16, 1952; 50).

Over the course of the journals, Hartigan moved, hesitantly but courageously, from non-objective abstraction toward abstracted expressive representation. Her new direction challenged current art world biases with a recognizable if encrypted component of socio-cultural commentary. Hartigan was not unique in this concern. Larry Rivers was doing the same things more blatantly and less abstractly, but she was distinctive. Her choice of "feminine" subjects like *Grand Street Brides* (1954; Fig. 1) and artificial flowers was a risk for a woman painter.

In common with other second generation abstractionists, Hartigan remained focused on the formal qualities of a painting, committed to abstraction, and a passionate colorist. She frequently lists color palettes she hopes to try. They are very specific and never pastel or pretty harmonies. In a number of entries, she repudiates a commitment to certain narrow, clichéd painterly ideals including all-over painting and pure color.

On December 30, 1953, she writes, "...I'm in love with the nineteenth century. I think I've learned ... not to fight romanticism and 'excess,' to become even more ambitious for an encompassing art, and to keep contained and strong" (113). Hartigan mentions many artists, composers, and writers admiringly, but she is particularly enamored of Spanish painters like Velázquez and Goya, as well as Manet, who also loved the Spanish. Other significant sources include Courbet and Delacroix. Like the Spaniards and Manet, both often worked with blacks, greys, ivory white and ochre-y yellows with touches of pink or red. Hopper and Rembrandt are also mentioned. On the other hand, Hartigan's obsession with *not* painting like Matisse, whom she may have felt she loved too well, can become

amusing. "This picture ["Bridal Portrait"] recalls Matisse but I hope there is enough of my hand there to make it my own" (March 15, 1954; 129).

Her choice of shop window mannequins as the subject of ambitious paintings shows her grappling with conventional feminine presentation. She herself flouted convention by marrying four times and having affairs. She embraced the unconventionality of the homosexuality of many friends, including perhaps her closest friend at the time of the journals, Frank O'Hara. In a thoughtful introduction, Terrence Diggory, the recently retired Ross Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and Chair of the Department of English at Skidmore College, concentrates on Hartigan's reiterated motif of masks and their various roles in society.

Hartigan is clearly conflicted about her position as a woman painter. She began her exhibition career as "George Hartigan," a name she used until 1951, because she believed that identification as a woman would skew critical response. She, herself, expresses doubt about the potential of women as painters: "... [H]ow few women artists have that core of objectivity necessary to make a work of art live by itself," she wrote on May 18, 1953 (82). Her observations of female colleagues are insightful and sometimes appreciative, and she certainly has female friends, but the work of male artists seems to be at the center of her interest. Perhaps this isn't surprising as it reflects the world she inhabited.

When Helen Frankenthaler gave a party very early in December 1951, her then boyfriend, Clement Greenberg, the most powerful art critic in the U.S., was there. On December 3, Hartigan writes "Clem got on his kick of 'women painters.' Same thing—too easily satisfied...." Greenberg claimed that certain male artists struggled more than a woman would to make good paintings. Apparently no one in the group listening to him disagreed, even Hartigan, who wanted to speak out but didn't. "Makes me realize how alone I am. Am I to scream at him, 'I struggle too. I do! I do!' He said he wants to be the contemporary of the first great

woman painter. What shit — he'd be the first to attack" (18).

She writes on Oct. 10, 1954:

I regret sometimes that this great gift has been born to me, a woman, with the countless flaws of vulnerability, worldliness, fears—what all! that I have. But so be it. I try to live the life that is necessary for it to flow. If fame is to come to me, it will require the necessary strength to continue to work and keep the proper distance the correct understanding in respect to my inner or spiritual self and my outer or worldly one. (152)

In the next paragraph of that entry she expresses feelings of kinship with Virginia Woolf's idealism and struggles to make good art.

A repeated motif is Hartigan's recurring need for money. She often speaks rather desperately of the need to buy new canvas and the expense of other art supplies: "Bought paint—still the canned crap, can't afford better" (June 4, 1952; 33). Her studios are so cold in the winter that she paints in ski clothes. She heats soup on a coal fire and takes short-term clerical jobs when absolutely necessary for survival. Her purchases of clothing are rare. Anxious lists of expenses offset by "Money on Hand" and projected income are not infrequent.

The narrative arc of the journals is satisfying: more dramatic than in many contemporary novels. Over the course of the entries, Hartigan not only discovers and claims a personal distinctive way of painting, she makes critical sales. In particular, the purchase of "River Bathers" (1953) by the Museum of Modern Art helps to establish her career and reputation. The book could be an excellent basis for a movie.

Hartigan worked with editors William La Moy and Joseph McCaffrey in planning the book, which was virtually complete at the time of her death. She had removed a very few paragraphs and some pages from the original text well before publication was discussed. Hartigan described one

excised section as "emotional out-pourings" related to a brief affair (May 2, 1953; 75). In every case, the nature and time of her self-censorship is documented. Her original orthography, including abbreviations and occasional misspellings, is reflected in the printed text. Hartigan's impressive command of language and the high quality of her grounding in traditional Western humanities and contemporaneous writing enriches her observations. A few brief sections of the holographic text, written in pencil or fountain pen in spiral and composition notebooks, are reproduced photographically.

La Moy and McCaffrey have done a meticulous, elegant job of presenting the material clearly and in a way reflecting Hartigan's wishes. They include a useful list of nicknames and first names and insert relevant poems and reviews at appropriate places in Hartigan's entries.

One quibble: the choices and descriptions in "Biographical Notes on Key Figures" seem quirky. Alfred Barr, who was nothing if not a "key figure" in Hartigan's career, is omitted and Clement Greenberg's entire entry is, "[A] Syracuse University graduate and a prominent art critic in New York during the period when the journals were being kept by Grace Hartigan." His birth and death dates are unaccountably omitted. On the other hand, a long-ish entry on poet John Ashbery, an occasionally mentioned friend, includes his birth date and how long he lived in Europe following a Fulbright grant (xxiii). A nice group of color reproductions allows the reader to consult paintings and prints discussed in the journals, and a large selection of black and white images opens complementary perspectives on the art world of the early 1950s. •

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Mercedes Matter

by Ellen G. Landau, Sandra Kraskin,
Phyllis Braff, Michael Zakian
MB Art Publishing Co., 2009

Reviewed by Barbara A. Wolanin

Mercedes Carles Matter (1913–2001) was an unforgettably elegant, passionate, and articulate painter and teacher who lived in the midst of the explosion of abstract art in America in the mid twentieth century.¹ Although she was a leader in studio art education and affected generations of young artists, her name and art are familiar mainly to those in the inner circle of the New York art world.² Like many women artists, Matter painted in the shadow of influential male artists, starting with her father, Arthur B. Carles, then her teacher Hans Hofmann, followed by artist friends like Jackson Pollock, Alexander Calder, and Alberto Giacometti. She struggled to meet the high standards she set for herself, reluctant to show work in progress, hesitant to exhibit, feeling her paintings were never quite finished (or as she would say “realized”) or quite good enough. Her friend Elaine De Kooning rightly urged her to get rid of her “giant inner strangler” critic (57).

A 2009 exhibition spanning her life’s work: “Mercedes Matter: A Retrospective,” curated by Ellen G. Landau, has at last provided an opportunity to see and appreciate the range and impact of her work.³ The accompanying richly illustrated catalogue includes in-depth discussions of her life, her art, and her place in the history of American art.

Mercedes Matter kept her paintings and drawings along with the letters she and her mother received from family and artist colleagues, photographs, and other memorabilia. This archival treasure trove was sorted out and made accessible to scholars courtesy of her son Alex Matter and through the efforts of Mark Borghi, who spent years assiduously organizing and documenting her estate. Ellen G. Landau, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities at Case Western Reserve University, expertly mined the papers to tell Matter’s story in the catalogue’s

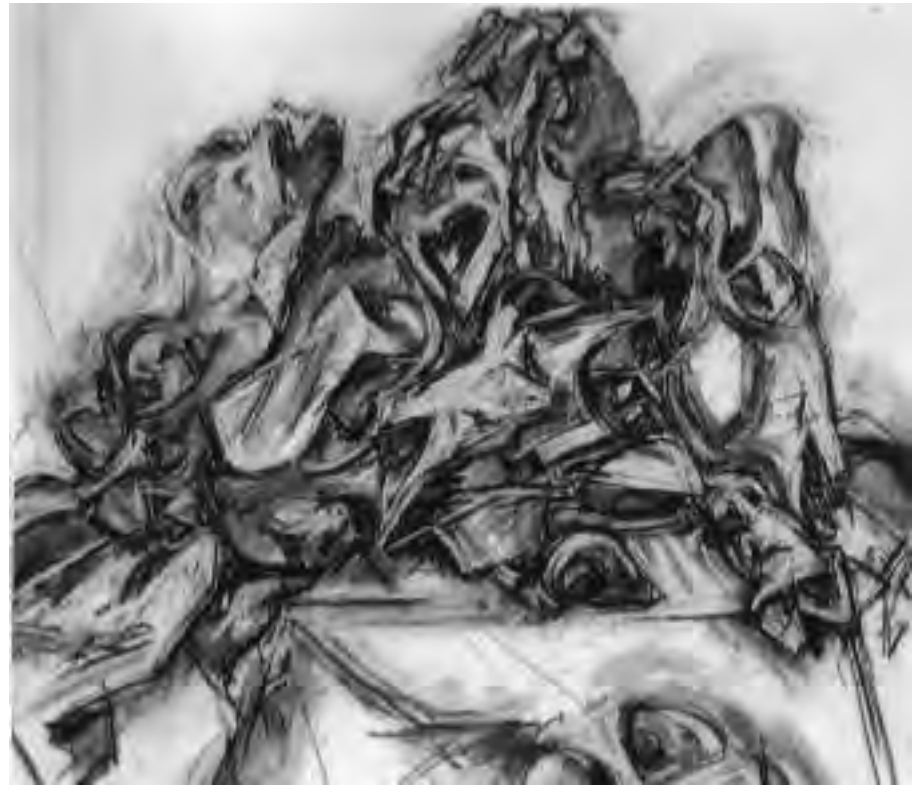


Fig. 1. *Still Life with Skulls* (1978–98), charcoal on canvas, 38" x 42". Estate of the artist.

central essay, “To be an Artist is to Embrace the World in One Kiss,” often letting her subject speak through her letters about her strong feelings and curiosity about life and art.

Mercedes Jeanne Carles was born in 1913 into a world filled with art. Her father Arthur Beecher Carles, Jr., was a promising young Philadelphia modernist, whose first solo exhibition was held at Alfred Stieglitz’s “291” gallery the previous year.⁴ Her mother, Mercedes de Cordoba—an amateur painter, fashion illustrator and writer for *Vogue*, musician, and actress—lived in New York with her own mother and artist sister, near her actor brother, while her husband remained in Philadelphia. Her parents’ strained, long-distance relationship set the stage for young Mercedes’s lifelong yearning for her father’s presence and approval. She only saw him sporadically, so the seven months she spent with her parents in France at age eight imprinted vivid memories. Her father set her up with paints, and she emulated him, even capturing his red-headed model Angele (83). “Little Mercy” (as she later hated to be called) was moved from one convent school to another almost every year,

ending with a positive experience with the arts at the Bennett School (18).

Calling herself Jeanne (her middle name) Carles, the beautiful young woman was attracted to men who were talented artists, including her teacher Hans Hofmann, who was her father’s age. In 1933 she brought her father and Hofmann together, and all three spent the summer of 1934 in Gloucester, Massachusetts.⁵ (Hofmann remained her friend and supporter, even after he reunited with his wife and his former student and lover married.) Hofmann’s principles of constructing a composition by analyzing objects’ dynamic relations in space and in tension with the two-dimensional surface, as well as his method of alternating working in color and in black and white, continued to guide her art practice.

Landau describes the impact of Hofmann and his teaching philosophy on Jeanne Carles and her experience working for the Works Progress Administration. Her artist friends included Arshile Gorky, Lee Krasner, and Fernand Léger, through whom she met her husband, the Swiss graphic artist and photographer Herbert Matter. Landau,

curator of the 2007 exhibition "Pollock Matters," describes the strong connection between Herbert's photographic experiments and Jackson Pollock's new way of painting.⁶ Not long after their son Alex was born, the Matters moved to California so Herbert could work with Charles Eames. It was a difficult time for Mercedes, who missed her friends. Later, after returning to New York, she was one of the few women to be included in the debates and discussions at the Cedar Tavern and The Artists Club. Landau explores Matter's views of painting and her preference for the still life subject, pointing out parallels between Krasner and Matter, who both returned to Hofmann's teachings to create some of their strongest work in the 1970s (59). Additional information on Matter and her artist colleagues in the twenty pages of endnotes greatly enrich Landau's essay.

Sandra Kraskin's essay, "American Abstract Artist: Mercedes Carles Matter and the Vanguard in the 1930s and 1940s," details Matter's important role as a founding member of the American Abstract Artists. One of the few females, she participated in AAA discussions and exhibitions from 1936 to 1940. Kraskin illustrates her essay with graphics and photographs that provide a context for the work of the artist then known as Jeanne Carles, who phased out of the group when those promoting geometric over expressionistic abstraction became dominant (122).

In "Creativity in the Later Years," Phyllis Braff points out interesting parallels between Matter's "energy-filled pulsating paintings" and her friend Alberto Giacometti's sculpture (162-63). Braff details how Matter's deeply-felt understandings of paintings by Cézanne and other masters and her experience teaching caused her to rebel against the liberal arts curriculum. Her 1963 *Art News* article, "What's Wrong with U.S. Art Schools," drew a lot of attention and led to the founding in 1964 of a school that emphasized time in the studio and lectures by leading artists and critics. Matter was the first director of the New York Studio School and continued teaching there into her eighties.

Matter's art and teaching were

grounded in Hofmann's classes. She focused most often on the still life, starting by looking at something real, as he had taught her in the 1930s. She left setups in her studio for years, working over and over one composition. Michael Zakian's "Inside and Outside: Mercedes Matter's Still Lives" muses on the painter's new conception of the still life and how she used it "to provide a self-enclosed, interior reality offering shelter and sanctuary from the external world" (211). He sees her whirlwind compositions as a reaction to not being "taken seriously as a female artist. One way of gaining acceptance on equal terms with the men was to emphasize aggressive energy," writes Zakian (211). He explores the theme of mortality in her powerful late still lifes of skulls (for example, Fig. 1), even suggesting she was still grappling with her long-deceased but always too distant father.

All of the essays are thoroughly illustrated with small documentary and comparative images, many drawn from the Matter archive. High-quality color images of all of the works in the exhibition are inserted between the essays in chronological groupings. A chronology—an important contribution in itself—provides an overview of her life and links the essays. The brief bibliography, consisting of her scattered published articles, unpublished notes and interviews, and several publications where her work was cited or included, points up the need for this volume focusing on her alone.

The catalogue gives a comprehensive overview of Matter's artistic development. Like her father, Matter did not regularly sign and date her paintings or keep systematic records, and some works by others may have been stored with hers. Also, her paintings vary in success, and some seem not quite resolved or finished, but the best of them are breathtaking in their explosive energy and complexity.

The dramatic design of the book pays tribute to Herbert Matter's graphic work. On the cover of the horizontal-format volume is a close-up photograph of a young nude Mercedes framed by textured driftwood, taken by her future husband. Unfortunately, this beautiful

image reinforces her reputation as a femme fatale rather than her importance as a serious artist and thinker. Inside the book, text and images are bordered by large expanses of white. The resulting 6-inch-wide sans-serif text is not easy on the eye. A number of images illustrating the text were cropped to fit the format, in an injustice to the artists.⁷

Mercedes Matter's paintings are rarely included in surveys of the period, and only a handful are found in museum collections. Landau and the other essayists are to be commended for bringing attention to her important contributions, which should lead to her inclusion in future exhibitions and anthologies concerned with this exciting period in American art. •

Barbara Wolanin is an art historian who writes on the American modernist Arthur B. Carles and his students. She is Curator for the Architect of the U.S. Capitol.

Notes

1. This reviewer first met and interviewed Mercedes Matter in 1976, while working on my doctoral dissertation on her father, Arthur B. Carles. Subsequently, I interviewed and met with her a number of times, the last being in 2000, at the time of the large retrospective of her father's paintings at the Hollis Taggart Galleries in New York.
2. See for example, Joan Marter, "Negotiating Abstraction: Lee Krasner, Mercedes Carles Matter, and the Hofmann Years," *WAJ* 28:2 (Fall/Winter 2007): 35-40.
3. The exhibition opened at the Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, New York, (Oct. 29-Dec. 14, 2009), and traveled to the Weisman Gallery, Pepperdine Univ., Malibu, CA (Jan. 23-April 4, 2010); Guild Hall, East Hampton, NY (June 18-Aug. 1, 2010); Figge Art Museum, Knox College, Davenport, IA (Sept. 4, 2010-Jan. 2, 2011). Essayists Sandra Kraskin and Michael Zakian are the directors of the Sidney Mishkin Gallery and Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, respectively.
4. See my *Arthur B. Carles: Painting with Color* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1983) and *The Orchestration of Color: The Paintings of Arthur B. Carles* (New York: Hollis Taggart Galleries, 2000), for Carles' life and work.
5. See my "Prelude to Provincetown: Hofmann, Matter, Carles, and the Legacy of their 1934 Gloucester Summer," in *From*

Hawthorne to Hofmann: Provincetown Vignettes, 1899-1945 (New York: Hollis Taggart Galleries, 2003.)

6. See Ellen G. Landau, "Action/Reaction: The Artistic Friendship of Herbert Matter and Jackson Pollock" and Appendix II in *Pollock Matters* (Boston: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2007).

Images and documents from Matter's estate and that of her late husband led to new understandings of the interrelationships and exchange of ideas between the Matters, Pollock and Lee Krasner, and Alexander Calder. Landau also is the author of *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), and Lee Krasner,

A Catalogue Raisonné (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995).

7. Arthur B. Carles's *Repose* and Alfred Stieglitz's photograph of him (pp.14 and 15) are cropped, for example, and even the plates of Matter's own paintings are slightly cropped at the edges.

Unseen Mendieta

by Olga Viso
Prestel, 2009

Reviewed by Joanna Roche

My art is grounded on the primordial accumulations, the unconscious urges that animate the world, not in an attempt to redeem the past, but rather in confrontation with the void, the orphanhood, the unbaptized earth of the beginning, the time that from within the earth looks upon us.

Ana Mendieta,
Artist's Proposal to
Bard College for
La Maja de Yerba, 1984

Ana Mendieta's (1948-85) art will always compel us to look and think because she addresses a fundamental human longing that is also an impossibility: to become nature. This poignant conflict is evident in the quiet elegance of Mendieta's gesture observed in a 1970s photo of the artist (Fig. 1). This is just one of the two hundred previously unpublished images of and by the artist in *Unseen Mendieta*, a stunning, large-format volume of works carefully culled by Mendieta scholar Olga Viso from the extensive and largely untapped Ana Mendieta Papers. In this undated photo from the 1970s, the artist is caught at the exact instant of attempting to merge with nature, while remaining exiled from it. Mendieta climbs into the tree's cavity, in "a voluntary submersion and identification with nature" (296), but clothed, human—she remains separated from it, in a state of "orphanhood."

Unseen Mendieta is a labor that continues Viso's important 2004

retrospective of Mendieta organized for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. We turn its 304 pages as we might turn the corner in an exhibition, surprised and grateful to artist and curator for what we have never seen before. This image—along with scores of other Mendieta photographs and film stills—surprised me. We have seen the artist in her famous 1970s *Tree of Life* series, where her mud-encrusted body faces us, fused with the trunk itself. Here, in a gesture like fleeting dance step, we see Mendieta as motion, not stasis. This volume allows readers to absorb an enormous range of Mendieta's oeuvre, demonstrating Viso's point, that while Ana Mendieta may be known to us, she is still very much unseen.

In her introductory essay, "Beyond the Visible," Viso writes: "My aim is to make available more of the artist's prolific production and reveal her tremendous spirit of experimentation and demanding and rigorous methods" (12). In this volume she has done so. This collection of images—the majority in color and full page—is a call to (re)examine the extensive body of 35 mm slides and Super 8 films left by this artist, whose archives have become more accessible to researchers since the Galerie Lelong in New York assumed representation of the Mendieta estate in 1991. Indeed, this book continues Viso's effort as a curator to bring Mendieta's work out of the archive and into a public forum. And while *Unseen Mendieta* is accessible to a general readership, offering an excellent overview to those less familiar with the artist, it also offers artists and art historians an opportunity to deepen their knowledge.

Viso has structured this wealth of imagery into seven useful thematic groupings arranged in a roughly



Fig 1. Photographer unknown, "Ana Mendieta poses against a tree" (1970s) (location unknown). 35 mm black-and-white negative from artist's archive.

chronological sequence. Beginning with Mendieta's work of the early 1970s while a graduate student in Iowa, and concluding with works-in-progress and project proposals of the 1980s, the sections are titled: "Intermedia," "The Lure of Mexico," "Rituals of Rebirth," "Purifying Flame," "Islands," "Ancestral Return" and "In the Public Realm." Each section is introduced by a brief, informative essay that serves to preface Viso's thematic selection of artworks and provides the reader with an intellectual and biographical context for understanding the images.

Mendieta wrote in November 1982 in a proposal for Cityarts: "It is my hope, having been a conscious collaborator with nature for over a decade, to have this opportunity for creating living,

flowering sculptures in New York" (290). By making available one of the most thorough visual documentations of Mendieta as collaborator, *Unseen Mendieta* might be said to be a fulfillment of the artist's wish to be recognized as a "conscious collaborator with nature." Whether through her famous *Siluetas* series of the late 1970s (again, many of the images are reproduced here for the first time) or the little-known untitled gunpowder work of 1981 in the sands of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, we are able to witness this collaboration. These photographs (particularly the reproductions of her 35 mm color slides) are breathtaking—filling single and double page layouts with the immediacy of an action just witnessed.

The combined visual energy—of Mendieta's art and Viso's compilation—manifested in a recent dream, in which I had laid the book down somewhere as I

struggled to cross a road. Its pale grey cover blended with the ground and I could not find it. I began to search for the book and finally spotted a group of young women looking at something—my book. They were visibly excited, even happy. I rushed over, relieved that it was not lost, and said, "Let me show you," and as I turned the pages of the book to show them the work of Ana Mendieta, the pages I saw were all images of births.

Like all dreams, this one reads at many levels: the birth of the next generation of artists and art historians, my role in that crossing, anxiety about loss of "the book" (knowledge)—there are many interpretations. But the point of this recounting is that my dream was prompted by the power of Mendieta's work as conveyed by the images in *Unseen Mendieta*. As readers, we share author Viso's journey of over five years

of research and her deep knowledge of the artist's archive. We also learn much from her approximately one hundred interviews with the artist's family, friends, and art-world associates. Viso's accomplishment, echoed in my dream, is one of sharing this work with a new generation as well as with those of us who "grew up" studying Mendieta. Beyond being an important collection of unpublished work, *Unseen Mendieta* is an opportunity for readers to collaborate (and dream) with Mendieta—and nature. •

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Alice Neel: Painted Truths

by Jeremy Lewison and Barry Walker, with essays by Tamar Garb and Robert Storr
Museum of Fine Arts Houston, 2009.

Reviewed by Pamela H. Simpson

Given her struggles, her perseverance, and her engaging personality, Alice Neel (1900-84) is an artist easy to admire, but her work packs such a wallop that it is sometimes hard to like. How does one reconcile the gregarious, down-to-earth, no-nonsense Neel with the grotesque distortions she sometimes brings to her painted portraits? *Alice Neel: Painted Truths* tries to answer that question with a penetrating look at the portraits and a consideration of what "truth" entailed for her. This big (296 pages), lavishly illustrated (120 color, 26 black-and-white) volume is the catalogue for an exhibit organized by the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Introductory essays by the curators, Jeremy Lewison and Barry Walker, and by art historians Tamar Garb and Robert Storr, as well as brief comments by three contemporary artists, Frank Auerbach, Marlene Dumas, and Chris Ofili, make

up the first third of the book; the rest is devoted to the catalogue of the paintings. An illustrated chronology of Neel's life and an extensive bibliography and index conclude the volume. A handsome publication, it adds to the biographies of the artist (by Patricia Hills, 1983, and Pamela Allara, 1998) by focusing on Neel's unique contributions to the art of portraiture and by contrasting that with the art of her contemporaries from the 1930s to the 1980s.

Garb's essay, the first in the volume, is especially good at placing Neel's work in the historical context of early modernism. Neel knew her art history and was influenced by artists as diverse as Goya and Max Beckman. She once referred to Picasso's cubist portraits as the "human race torn to pieces" (18), a description that might apply to her own work, though the tearing apart was not done in a formalist breakup of planes and fragments, but rather by penetrating sometimes uncomfortably into the sitter's personality. Garb refers to Neel as a "realist," a designation Neel herself did not totally embrace. She once said she preferred "a combination of realism and expressionism" as a description (25), but Garb's point is that the realism is not on



Fig. 1. Alice Neel, *Robert Smithson* (1962), oil on canvas, 40" x 24 1/4". Courtesy of Locks Foundation.

the surface; it is in the honesty and truth of the revelation. Contrasting Neel's approach with other modernists such as

Andy Warhol and Chuck Close, Garb finds them more interested in surface and type rather than individual character. Neel always focused on the individual. Even her working method was different. She didn't use photographs but insisted on sittings, often multiple ones, where she engaged her subjects in animated conversation, and while they talked, Neel worked. The artists Neel admired most, including Kokoschka and Munch, were all from the gestural, painterly tradition.

Neel was an artist who constantly had to contend with being out of the mainstream. She was a woman when art was dominated by men, a portraitist when others had pronounced the whole genre dead, a realist/expressionist when art was abstract. Like many women artists, she struggled for recognition, and it was really only with the women's movement in the 1970s that it finally came to her. Thrust into the contemporary art world, she often cajoled its stars, including Robert Smithson, Frank O'Hara, Linda Nochlin, and Andy Warhol, to pose for her. The Warhol portrait (1970) is a startling painting. The face is a recognizable likeness with eyes shut (she usually let the sitter chose the pose), but the bare-chested body is an almost cruel rendering of sagging breasts, surgery scars, tummy bulging over a corset, and pale, sickly colors. Garb says that "nothing could have been more opposed to the antipsychologizing, interior-denying credo of her sutured sitter than the manner in which Neel represented him" (17). The unflinching realism of it is something we find in her paintings again and again.

The second essay is by Lewison, a curator and advisor to the Neel estate and one of the main organizers of the exhibit. He begins by recounting the story of Neel posing for Robert Mapplethorpe in 1984. Knowing she had cancer, she asked him take the picture of her with her eyes closed so she would have a chance to see what she would look like when she was dead. That willingness to engage death and the grotesque was characteristic of how she lived her life and how she portrayed her sitters, including herself, as is

evidenced in her own nude self-portrait at age eighty. Lewison insightfully compares Neel's work to that of Diane Arbus, another woman who saw beauty in the grotesque. Neel's portrait of Robert Smithson (1962, Fig. 1) is a case in point. Her rendering of the inflamed acne on his cheek turns it into an "oozing, thick passage of paint applied with a palette knife in red smears" (39), but it is also fully part of the overall conception with its enlivened brushstrokes and rhythmic outlines. She didn't invent the grotesque—as she said, "I am only showing the barbarity of life" (39)—but it was a grotesque that she also lovingly engaged. Lewison quotes critic Lawrence Campbell that Neel "seems to detect a hidden weakness in her sitters which she drags out yelping, into the clear glare of day" (52). Campbell thought that an act of aggression, but Lewison sees it as empathetic. She presents to us the whole of the "human comedy" (58).

Robert Storr's essay is based on a visit he made to Neel's studio in 1978 as part of the Video Data Bank project to interview contemporary artists. He vividly recalls the way her paintings were stacked all over the living room, a space that doubled as her painting area. Lined up against the walls so big ones were in the back and small ones in the front, it looked like a crowd of people filled the room. She loved being surrounded by her work. He refers to her style as not that of a "notational form-maker" but rather that of "an exhaustive recorder" and adds that she "is unrivaled in the skill and efficiency with which she evoked personality while delineating the fundamental contours of a face or hands" (75). Sometimes those could be distorted, or even claw like, but she did indeed "capture souls" as she often claimed. As delighted as Storr is to see any single Neel portrait, he always remembers them as being part of a group, just as he first saw them in her studio, and thinks that Neel must have thought of them that way as well. They were all part of her collection of souls.

Barry Walker, curator of Contemporary Art at Houston, and the other prime organizer of the exhibit, offers an

innovative essay on Neel's compositional techniques, an approach not often brought to her work. People are so interested in the subjects, they often forget what went into making the paintings. In some very close and careful formal readings Walker presents evidence for Neel's choices, changes, and decisions as he demonstrates that compositional space was key to her presentation. He also makes revealing comparisons of her work with Robert Henri's advice to portraitists in *Art Spirit* (1923), a book that influenced Neel's thinking.

Of the three contemporary artists who offer comments, Marlene Dumas's are the most interesting. She greatly admired Neel and was directly influenced by her work. She calls the Warhol portrait "one of the most beautiful paintings of the twentieth century" (95) and says her own well-known image of her daughter, *The Painter* (1994), was done in homage to it.

Alice Neel: Painted Truths joins a growing list of exhibition catalogues on Neel's work and will be essential reading for anyone interested in her career. If there are criticisms to be made, one would be to question why the curators included a whole section of cityscapes in the exhibit, but failed to discuss them in the essays. The volume focuses so emphatically on portraiture, the cityscapes, as interesting as they are, seem superfluous. Another would be to lament that Walker, with all his insightful formal analysis of the compositions, doesn't consider how the choices she made might contribute to the content of the imagery. A third might be to wish that Auerbach and Ofili had more to say about Neel; their inclusion doesn't add much to the volume. But those are small quibbles. There is plenty here to engage both the eye and the brain. While the paintings still might be unsettling, the materials presented here will go a long way to helping us to understand them. •

Pamela Simpson, a long-time *WAF* reviewer, is the Ernest Williams II Professor of Art History at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. Her current work is on corn palaces and butter sculpture.

Feminist Art and the Maternal

by Andrea Liss

University of Minnesota Press, 2009

Reviewed by Patricia Briggs

Considering how productive the image of the fertility goddess has been for feminist artists, and considering how fruitful the concept of the maternal has been for psychoanalytic criticism, it is surprising that so little has been written about the aesthetic perspectives of actual mothers. In *Feminist Art and the Maternal* Andrea Liss argues that patriarchal society's disdain for women, especially mothers, has long been coupled with a sentimental (and inaccurate) image of motherhood, which in turn has led to the scholarly neglect of this topic, even among feminist scholars. Since the late 1990s, Liss writes, "[t]he mother [...] remained a silent outcast for many feminists who strategically needed to distance themselves from all that was culturally coded as passive, weak, and irrational" (xv). This point is well taken and readers may feel a kind of exotic pleasure as they follow Liss's close examination of artworks exploring motherhood, a subject which continues to be oddly "taboo" (1).

Feminist Art and the Maternal is one part narrative (drawn from the author's experience as a mother), one part documentation (of works by artist-mothers), and one part theory. Because Liss uses a first-person narrative voice instead of the depersonalized, all-knowing (masculine) voice of the traditional scholar, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* remains accessible to non-specialists even when it ventures into debates concerning theories of identity.

Beginning in the 1980s with the rise of poststructuralist theory, the notion that human subjectivity is culturally constructed (formed by discourse, ideology, and—according to Freud and Lacan—psychological processes of mirroring and projection) took precedence over so-called "essentialist" feminist theories which sought to understand women's consciousness as shaped by the female body (i.e., its



Fig. 1. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Come In* (1973), detail from 95 black and white photographs, each 3 1/2" x 5", mounted on foam core, 55" x 42 1/4" overall, plus chain and dust rag. Individual photographs by Jusua Siderowitz, overall photography by Jeffrey Sturges. ©Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

reproductive capability). Rather than theorizing women's identity as a function of a female (or maternal) essence, poststructuralist theories tend to conceptualize identity as primarily socially and culturally constructed. Challenging the charge of essentialism, Liss creatively rethinks the terms of this ongoing debate, by valuing intersubjective connection over the normative ideal of singular, autonomous individuality. Whereas the empathetic and biological entanglement of mothers with their children has often been seen as a deficiency barring mothers (and women) from occupying the position of "individual" (the Cartesian norm of the self-sufficient or autonomous subject), Liss argues that the "intersubjective" aspects of a mother's experiences, which involve psycho-logical dispersion, fragmentation, doubling and mirroring, offer a model for humanity in general that is more empathetic, passionate, and collaborative than the Cartesian norm, which is in fact a masculine ideal of subjectivity masquerading as a universal way of being and feeling in the world.

Feminist Art and the Maternal offers a fascinating survey of the work of mother-artists from the 1970s to present. Close, highly descriptive readings of specific works offer more information

than is usually presented outside of the context of catalogues or monographs. Examples include the complete text of Susan Hiller's explanatory panels for *Ten Months* (1977-79)—a series of photographs documenting the swell of the artist's belly during pregnancy (15)—and pages of dialogue from Sherry Millner's 1983 film *Womb with a View* (8-10). Liss's emphasis on description and transcription make *Feminist Art and the Maternal* an archive of material that others will surely find useful.

"Breaching the Taboo," the opening chapter, is devoted to art of the 1970s and 1980s. It addresses the "complexities of the domestic and the maternal from the mother's perspective" (3). Here, Liss offers in-depth descriptions of works whose titles, but not content, are well known, such as *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, a film that is often cited but rarely screened. A refreshing analysis of Mary Kelly's work appears in the chapter entitled "Intersubjectivities: Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*." Instead of reading *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79) as an illustration of Lacan's theory of the Imaginary and Symbolic, Liss sees Kelly animating her own voice as a mother in ways "ironically refuting, partially

embracing, and simultaneously rethinking” aspects of Lacanian theory (34). While Liss recognizes Kelly’s pseudo-scientific presentation of the residues of childcare as measurable evidence logically presented—for example the contents of her son’s dirty diaper and the quantity of liquids he ingested—the author argues that Kelly’s charts and figures should also be viewed as humorous, especially as Kelly has acknowledged them as “rather parodic algorithms” (36).

Liss’s chapter on Mierle Laderman Ukeles entitled “Maternal Care: Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s Maintenance Art” is particularly strong. Whereas this artist’s *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance* (1973), featuring herself washing the floors of galleries at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, is viewed often as an exploration of social class and the invisibility of working-class laborers, Liss shows that Ukeles’s concern with labor developed from her experience of doing the invisible work of a mother maintaining a home. The collaborative, caring, maintenance-of-the-life-of-others aspect of Ukeles’s *Touch Sanitation Performance* (June 1979–June 1980)—where the artist shakes the hands of all 8,500 NYC sanitation workers—is prefigured, as Liss demonstrates, by Ukeles’s lesser-known projects focused on the mother/child relationship. *Dressing to Go Out/*

Undressing to Come In (1973; Fig. 1), for example, comprises a series of photographs showing the artist with her two small children engaged in the time-consuming process of getting into their coats, hats, and shoes so that they can leave the house. Ukeles’s early work reveals that her exploration of labor is based not on an analysis of class, but rather in her experience of motherhood and her analysis of gender.

In “Mamas Out of Place” Liss surveys the 1990s to present. Ellen McMahon’s *No New Work* (1993), for example, is a project that responds to the framework for promotion and tenure in university studio art departments, which value only the “work” that is fit to appear on a curriculum vitae. Presented as a series of posters that highlight the work ignored by the academic system, *No New Work* is a series of prints on paper made from the diapers of the artist’s daughter, which focus on the valuable “work” of bonding, listening to children, and mothers taking leave during family crises. Turning to the racial politics of representing motherhood, Liss devotes one chapter to the photography of Renée Cox and another to the films of Ngozi Onwurah. Cox explores ways in which racial stereotypes of the nanny, the child-care worker, the welfare mother, and the sexually promiscuous black woman complicate representations

of black motherhood, while Onwurah documents a “British Nigerian daughter’s changing and transformative relationship with her white British mother” (109).

The final sections of the book concern motherhood and loss. In a short “interlude” preceding the final chapter, Liss writes about her own struggles with breast cancer and shares her experience of observing her son as he responds to her debilitated body and the prospect of losing his mother. The final chapter is devoted to *Crossings* (1991) by Civia Rosenberg and May Stevens about the deaths of their sons. In her moving discussion of this powerful collaborative work, Liss reminds us that beyond the life-giving aspects of motherhood, being a mother also encompasses experiences of extreme loss that defy description.

This paperback volume is illustrated throughout with black and white images of works discussed and contains an index and bibliography. Its new treatment of a timeless subject make *Feminist Art and the Maternal* an important and welcome contribution to the literature on the topic of motherhood and the visual arts. •

Patricia Briggs is a critic and independent curator. Her “Formulas for a Queer Future: Contemporary Painting and Queer Theory” is forthcoming in *Cultural Critique*.

Bauhaus Women: Art, Handicraft, Design

by Ulrike Müller.
Flammarion, 2009

Reviewed by Rachel Epp Buller

For women artists in Germany in the early twentieth century, the Bauhaus represented a beacon of hope. Formerly denied acceptance to serious art academies and shunted into decorative arts tracks (denoting both secondary and female), women flocked to this new art school that touted a leveling of the playing fields. Arts and crafts were to be integrated with each

other and with technology, and male and female artists were to be on an equal footing. Although its director Walter Gropius and others soon came to have second thoughts about such equal opportunity, limiting the percentage of female students and refusing them access to some of the workshops, the Bauhaus provided women an unprecedented opportunity for education and artistic advancement. Ulrike Müller’s book on the women of the Bauhaus brings renewed attention to the lives and works of photographers, weavers, ceramicists, graphic artists, set designers, sculptors, and interior designers who came to the school as students, teachers, and master’s wives.

As Müller clarifies in the introduction, this book is not about *all* the women of the Bauhaus. Through detailed essays on twenty selected women, Müller lays the foundation for how and why many female artists sought out the potential of the Bauhaus. She outlines the limited opportunities in arts education for German women before 1919, when the academies and universities were opened to both sexes. Women quickly embraced the new possibilities, and that same year saw more female than male applicants to the Bauhaus. The gender ratio among faculty was not nearly so equal, as “Gropius’s grandiose if half-hearted promise of equal rights and duties for both sexes



Fig. 1. Friedl Dicker, Poster for first Bauhaus evening with a reading by Else Lasker-Schüler (1920), lithograph. Klassik Stiftung, Weimar.

remained theoretical in the teaching field" (14). At the Weimar Bauhaus, six of the forty-five faculty were women; the numbers at Dessau were better, with six of thirty-five; but in Berlin it was one of thirteen. Eventually, declining numbers of female faculty paralleled a gradual drop in female enrollment, particularly as the school's focus shifted toward architecture.

Müller divides her chapters largely by specialty of media, but begins with a section on students and teachers of the first generation. She opens with a prominently placed discussion of Gertrud Grunow, the only female form master at the school, who led courses in music, dance, and "practical harmonizing," designed to reawaken neglected senses. While Grunow appears to have been well-respected, she was neither a self-promoter nor a promoter of modern art, both of which may explain her gradual disappearance from Bauhaus life. Müller's inclusion of the now little-known Helene Börner, head of the weaving workshop in Weimar, prefaces the discussion of how the weaving studio evolved into a "women's workshop." Most often directed to the class because of their gender, the

women weavers were further restricted by the Weimar chamber of trade, which did not give apprenticeship certificates for weaving: "This also meant that it was not possible for women to register with the chamber of trade for the journeyman's or master's diploma, which again represented a serious handicap in terms of their future professional life" (25). The weaving workshop was only one example of the conservative views of gender at the Bauhaus, despite the theoretically enlightened ideas behind the school. During the economic crisis of the early 1920s, weaving student Benite Otte and others gave up some of their classes to spend time growing vegetables and preparing food for their colleagues and teachers, a gendered sacrifice for which they were greatly praised by teacher Oskar Schlemmer.

Despite the restrictions, many women thrived in the weaving workshop, and Müller admits to being hard-pressed to choose only a few to highlight for her book. Not surprisingly, she includes Gunta Stölzl,¹ the only female full young master, who succeeded Börner. Along with a discussion of her work, Müller fills in details of Stölzl's personal life, from her early criticism of Börner to the anti-Semitic recriminations she suffered from her own students after her marriage to the Jewish architect Arie Sharon. Anni Albers, another standout, embodied Bauhaus ideals as she "consistently merged the crafts from the weaving workshop, industrial textile production, and the abstract art of the modernist period, and brought them to a new unity" (51).

The next section features two women involved with the ceramics workshop, held only at the Weimar school. While the Bauhaus administration was reluctant to allow women to enter the ceramics workshop, Grete Heymann-Loebenstein and Marguerite Friedlaender-Wildenhain persisted and proved notable exceptions. Both came to the Bauhaus with signifi-

cant prior art education and later found professional success outside Germany. In 1923, Heymann-Loebenstein established the Haël Workshops for Art Ceramics, a highly successful enterprise until its forced closure and sale in 1933. After fleeing to England, she continued ceramic production and also turned to painting and exhibited widely in post-war London. Friedlaender-Wildenhain, the first German female pottery master to complete the journeyman's exam, established a successful workshop near Amsterdam before leaving for the United States in the 1940s, settling and making a name for herself in California.

Müller next looks at three "extraordinary" artists with different media specialties. In his altered admissions policies following an influx of female students, Gropius suggested in 1920 that "for the foreseeable future, only women of extraordinary talent be accepted at the school" (84). Müller argues that Ilse Fehling, Friedl Dicker, and Lou Scheper each qualified as such exceptional talents. Fehling, the only female sculptor at the Bauhaus, later achieved fame for her stage and costume designs in theater and film. Dicker, who had followed Johannes Itten from Vienna, excelled at the Bauhaus and beyond in painting, graphics (Fig. 1), jewelry, costume design, and interior design. Scheper honed her skills as a painter, studying mural painting at the school then developing a long career as a painter, children's book illustrator, and architectural designer. Müller next groups interior designer Lilly Reich, toy designer Alma Büscher, and metal designer Marianne Brandt as "constructive women in the house" (104). While each of these sections features compelling work and brings to light much new information about the artists, the attempt to organize the work by media is stretched.

The final section, subtitled "Masters of Photography and the Diary," would have been strengthened by focusing solely on photography, which was the number two area for women at the Bauhaus, next to the weaving workshop. While there was no formal photography class at the school until 1929, many students experimented with the medium. Florence Henri left the

Bauhaus after only one semester, so a discussion of her here is perhaps questionable, but she went on to develop a successful photography career in Paris. Grete Stern studied independently with Walter Peterhans, who would teach the first photography class at the Bauhaus, then later taught at the school herself. She developed a collaborative photography practice with Ellen Rosenberg as the artist duo ringl+pit. Lucia Moholy, whose only official title was “master’s wife,” trained as a photographer and produced many images that are now integral to the photographic history of the Bauhaus. The inclusion of “master’s wife” Ise Gropius in this section, however, appears out of place, as her contribution to the school was as hostess, tour guide, and diarist, not as an artist in her own right. She would have been better discussed in the book’s introduction, where Müller quotes Lucia Moholy on the role of the master’s wives, “those who had no official status and yet played a decisive role in the aftermath of the Bauhaus...” (11).

Müller’s volume is richly illustrated with examples of the incredible diversity among Bauhaus women’s

production. Along with oft-reproduced images of textile design, Müller includes many less obvious examples of drawings, prints, poster designs, and ceramics. The greatest weakness of the text is that the titular category “Bauhaus women” does not come close to encompassing all of the women to have trained at the school. While it might have been an impossible task to incorporate all Bauhaus women into a single text, Müller might have more clearly defined her parameters for inclusion.

One of Müller’s greatest contributions in the book is in searching out and recovering detailed information about the lives and works of the artists she discusses. While many of their names are recognizable in the context of the Bauhaus, Müller recuperated both their background training and their post-Bauhaus fates. Not surprisingly, many of the women suffered the same outcomes as their male colleagues, with their work censored and deemed “degenerate” by the National Socialists. A few, like Ilse Fehling, remained in Germany and continued arts-related careers in the postwar era. While many of them emigrated, and some imported Bauhaus

teachings to new locations, as Anni Albers did at Black Mountain College, for others the Bauhaus period remained their artistic heyday. Marianne Brandt, despite her commercially successful metalwork designs, eventually returned to her hometown and painted in near-obscure. Tragically, several Bauhaus women never lived to see the end of the war. Alma Büscher died during a bombing in 1944, the same year Otti Berger died at Auschwitz. In a heart-wrenching turn of events, Müller imparts how Friedl Dicker, while imprisoned at the Theresienstadt Ghetto, gave drawing and painting lessons to many of the children, carrying on Bauhaus ideals and, more importantly, bringing some much-needed humanity to an intolerable situation. Dicker, too, died at Auschwitz in 1944. •

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Notes

1. See review below.

Gunta Stölzl Bauhaus Master

edited by Monika Stadler and Yael Aloni
trans. by Allison Plath-Moseley
Hatje Cantz, 2009

Reviewed by Anja Baumhoff

Gunta Stölzl’s daughters, Monika Stadler and Yael Aloni, have provided an interesting, carefully selected cluster of primary source material on their accomplished mother, who headed the weaving workshop at the Bauhaus from 1925 to 1931.¹ Their profusely illustrated book contains private correspondence as well as diary notes of this important Bauhaus figure. Stölzl’s writings are framed between a brief introduction at the beginning and a biography at the end. Also useful are a list of key weaving

terms and a list of persons that gives the reader a quick overview over her circle of friends and acquaintances. The text covers Gunta Stölzl’s (1897-1983) early years, including her work as a nurse during the First World War, and her time as a student at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau, beginning in 1919. Sadly, information on her early studies in Munich at the Royal School of Arts and Crafts and her association with the *Wandervogel* life reform movement (the prewar German youth movement) are missing. The introduction states that the diary notes and letters will highlight new aspects of Gunta Stölzl; however, while the material may be new to many art historians, most is already known to scholars of Stölzl.

Born in Munich Stölzl went to the local School of Arts and Crafts and studied decorative painting, glass painting, ceramics, and art history. After

the war, she joined the Bauhaus in Weimar, where she studied weaving, and when the school moved to Dessau she became head of the weaving class. Stölzl was one of the most committed Bauhaus members and worked under all three school directors. She abruptly resigned her position at the Bauhaus in 1931, the victim of some complaints by students, the cause and nature of which have never fully been investigated due to lack of documentation, which probably burned when the Dessau Bauhaus was bombed during World War Two.

The book presents her texts in chronological order, with later accounts intertwined; for example Stölzl’s 1968 reflections on her time at the Bauhaus appear within a section of texts from the 1920s and 1930s. It is well known that later reflections often differ from earlier, contemporary accounts of one’s



Fig. 1. Gunta Stölzl, Hand-knotted runner (1923), Smyrna knots, wool on hemp warp, 198 3/8" x 39 3/8". Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

experiences, and here the popular approach of the book blurs the timeline between the contemporary accounts and her later memories.² The book ends with the conflict Stölzl experienced as master of the weaving workshop, which led to her sudden resignation in March 1931. Because the book gives little background to this story, readers might be left wondering. But the discussion surrounding the incident provides an

insight into the climate in Germany before the *Machtergreifung* (the Nazi's seizure of power), and her letters explain why she decided to emigrate. The book ends with three letters from Switzerland, where she established herself as a successful weaver in the following years.

The material itself is wonderful in opening up a lost world, and it does do so mainly through the language. Especially in her early years as a student, Stölzl is very creative with almost everything she does, and her writing proves amazingly descriptive and colorful, as can be seen here in her diaries and letters. In her diary she describes her first days at the newly founded Bauhaus in Weimar:

The party was a lively beginning; we were all carried away by it, and then came the serious words from Gropius. ... Itten — here great things are starting to become clear to me; mysteries, wider context appear visible; things I vaguely feel are entering my consciousness and now I can start to develop them. (Oct. 8, 1919; 45)

Allison Plath-Moseley's translation is generally very good, although it does not always convey the flair and the atmosphere of the original, because Stölzl's play with words is almost untranslatable, as when an experience Stölzl describes as "wundernett" is translated with a flat-sounding "it is great" (31).

The book is illustrated throughout, with 131 color plates, highlighting the scope of her work. Stölzl produced a range of weave-like knotted carpets, including a twenty-foot-long knotted runner which sold at the 1923 Bauhaus exhibit (1923; Fig. 1; the carpet was later shortened due to damage). She also worked with the technically complicated Jacquard loom, on which she made one of her best known carpets, the large wall hanging *Five Harnesses* ("Fünf Chöre"). Later, in Zurich she also did coat and dress fabrics, curtains, and upholstery in order to make a living, and she developed pioneering cellophane fabrics. While not contesting that Stölzl was a

craftswoman and not a fine artist, the book's depictions of watercolors and drawings as well as the colorful abstract patterns and weavings spring to life under the careful lighting used in the photographic process. For example, curtain fabric samples from 1927-28 have an almost three-dimensional quality in the book (108).

Notably, in the German edition the title *Bauhaus Meister* has a provocative subtext, as "meister" is the male form of master, another subtlety which inevitably gets lost in translation. But claiming the male attribute is significant. On the one hand, it indicates that her daughters, Aloni and Stadler, wish to emphasize that she belonged to the distinguished group of Bauhaus masters. On the other hand, the use of *meister* highlights the difference between this and the other books written on Stölzl, which have always called her *meisterin*, emphasizing that there was indeed a female master at the otherwise male-dominated Bauhaus. Nevertheless, Stadler and Aloni present historical evidence for their title, in the form of Stölzl's 1927 identification card displaying "meister" (10). We do not know whose handwriting it is we see on the card, though the family claims it is hers. However, it was typical for the time to use the male version, as women were generally subsumed under the male grammatical form. And if it was she who used the male form, it would merely underline her claim to be treated like the other *meisters*. This may sound simple today, but it was seen as daring at the time. She was, in fact, a so-called junior master, like her colleague Marcel Breuer, and thus held a lower status than other masters such as Klee or Kandinsky, for example. Moreover, as a female junior master she could not take equal rights for granted, and she comments in a letter to her much-loved brother Erwin on November 21, 1927: "my financial position causes me nothing but vexation, everyone else has gotten his civil servants raise, except for me, that is because of my contract, but in april i (sic) will categorically refuse to sign the thing the way it is" (92). While this problem did get resolved, she gradually lost most of her supporters because they left the Bauhaus in due course. In the end, this

spared her the suffering so many other Bauhäusler endured when Hitler came to power and eventually led to a better life abroad.

With its exceptional illustrations and the inclusion of some previously unpublished source material, this book is a useful addition to the literature on the Bauhaus. •

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Paula Modersohn-Becker

by Averil King
Antique Collectors' Club, 2009

Reviewed by Christiane Hertel

This beautifully illustrated volume comes on the heels of two centennial exhibitions held in 2007 opening new, and persuasive, chapters in the scholarly examination of Paula Modersohn-Becker's oeuvre.¹ One exhibition examined her paintings in the context of art in Paris in the years around 1900, the other her interest in Egyptian and early Greek art, especially mummy portraits and sculpture. Both contextualized her paintings not only culturally but also within her oeuvre, giving close consideration to her drawings and the preliminary studies for her paintings. Averil King's project is not a scholarly contribution, but to offer a straightforward monograph in English so that "her work will continue to receive the wider recognition it has long merited" (9).

Like most authors, King makes ample use of Modersohn-Becker's letters and journals,² and like other publications over the years,³ hers dedicates chapters to Modersohn-Becker's beginnings, the Worpswede artists' colony, the various genres in which she worked—landscape, still life, portrait, self-portrait—and considers her focus on the monumental nude under the thematic rubric of

Notes

1. The Stölzl family has been generous with scholars, including Magdalena Droste, ed., *Gunta Stölzl: Weberei am Bauhaus und aus eigener Werkstatt* (Berlin: Kupfergraben, 1987); Sigrid Wortman-Weltge, *Bauhaus-Textilien: Kunst und Künstlerinnen der Webwerkstatt* (Schaffhausen: Edition Stemmler, 1993), translated as: *Bauhaus-Textiles. Women Artists and the Weaving Workshop*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993); Ingrid Radewaldt, ed., *Gunta Stölzl. Meisterin am Bauhaus Dessau* (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 1997); and myself, Anja Baumhoff, *The Gendered World of the Bauhaus. The Politics of Power at the Weimar Republic's Premier Art Institut, 1919-1932* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001).

mother and child, which then leads to where many publications on Paula Modersohn-Becker end, to the artist's early death in 1907 at age thirty-one, following childbirth, and to Rainer-Maria Rilke's moving poem of 1908, *Requiem for a Friend*. King supplements this rehearsed sequence with seven topical chapters. "Paula's Heroes" introduces artists she admired—the Wilhelm Leibl circle, the Neu-Dachau group around Adolf Hoelzel, the symbolists Arnold Böcklin and Max Klinger, the Barbizon school, as well as Gustave Courbet, Charles Cottet and Auguste Rodin. King also dedicates one chapter each to her portrayal of peasants; Cézanne's influence, especially on her still lifes; Gauguin's influence on her depiction of the female nude; the "intimate intellectual friendship" with Rilke; her works on paper; and a comparison with Gabriele Münter and Marianne von Werefkin, two women painters who also started their careers in an artists' group, *The Blue Rider*, and then left that context behind.

King makes three critical interventions into current scholarship on Paula Modersohn-Becker. First, she proposes that we consider her engagement with Gauguin's art an admiring, yet critical reflection upon his primitivism as one characterized by a desire to take and an inability to give, hence as egotistical rather than communal, in short, false. King sees in a painting like *Nude Girl with*

2. Historical and neurobiological research has shown how complex the process of remembering actually is, and that memories should not be taken at face value but need critical examination and contextualisation. See for example, two publications by Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999), and *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006).

Flower Vases (1906-07) a "mock-imitation" of Gauguin and a resistance to his exploitative depiction of Tahitian women and girls as subservient to him. Thus King suggests that Modersohn-Becker's two versions of her half-length *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace* (1906), based on a photograph in which she poses in this way, were corrective primitivist appropriations of three types of painting that traditionally had been the domain of male artists: self-portraiture, the woman holding or offering flowers and fruit,⁴ and the female nude, resulting in a bold, literal self-offer or -giving. Second, King shares the critical perspective taken in the centennial exhibitions in Bremen and also by Diane Radycki in the recent outstanding WAJ issue dedicated to Modersohn-Becker,⁵ that indeed she was a "first" and this not solely among modern women artists but in modern painting as such. For example, King does not shy away from suggesting that Modersohn-Becker's portraits and self-portraits of 1905 and after anticipate Picasso's proto-Cubist portraits. Rilke's observation that she "in her increasingly bold artistic production even anticipated on occasion the work of the followers of these painters [van Gogh, Matisse] in Germany," presumably E.L. Kirchner and *Die Brücke*, is still awaiting critical examination.⁶ Among the group's subsequent members, she met Emil Nolde in Paris and Otto Mueller in Dresden. Third, King traces Modersohn-Becker's stylistic develop-



Fig. 1. Lee Hoetger with a Flower (1906) canvas, 21 5/8" x 13". Kunstmuseum Bottcherstrasse/Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.

ment toward an astounding certainty of bold, yet subtle color harmony, powerful and simplified form, and spare, asymmetrical composition. She also discusses Modersohn-Becker's painting technique, again perhaps following the examination in 2007 of her interest in the techniques and visual effects of encaustic and tempera and her preference of the latter over oil paint.

Given these strengths, the flaws of King's monograph are unfortunate. Spare footnotes offer biographical data or make unexplained major claims (e.g., that Modersohn-Becker was not religious), but do not locate paraphrased or cited material, let alone refer to existing scholarship. Second, there are dozens of lengthy descriptions of other artists' works mostly not reproduced, and far too many biographies of artists like Rembrandt or mini-surveys on topics like baroque Dutch still-life painting, information the educated reader can be trusted with looking up, if necessary. These passages distract from

what otherwise is a carefully interwoven, pleasantly accessible presentation of Modersohn-Becker's art and life. King's uncertainty of her reading audience's preparation for an informed appreciation of Modersohn-Becker's art make one wonder why she did not illustrate any paintings by Cézanne and Gauguin, when seeing them reproduced is essential to following her account of their importance to Modersohn-Becker. Last, there are some problematic chapters. One makes the utterly unconvincing claim of parity between Käthe Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker. There is a considerable distance not only between their technical mastery of the art of printmaking and its expressive potential, but also between their rather different approaches to the subject of work and class. Modersohn-Becker avoids the industrial, urban working class. However worn and tired, her peasants—children, women, the old and the poor—are dignified by nature, motherhood, and mystery, as King herself points out in her chapter "Peasants." We only need to think of

Kollwitz's print series *A Weavers' Rebellion* (1897) and her earlier intense engagement with Zola's novel *Germinal* to see that as a Worpswede artist, politically Modersohn-Becker was a conservative modernist, perhaps, as Gillian Perry has cautiously suggested, even anti-modern.⁷ On the other hand, whereas Kollwitz to her later regret signed the Worpswede artist Carl Vinnen's nationalistic pamphlet of 1911 protesting French art acquisitions by German museums, Modersohn-Becker, had she lived, surely would not have done so. A comparative study between Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker might involve the challenging task of tracing their differing and changing attitudes toward French art and French-German cultural political relations.

King's chapter on Modersohn-Becker and Rilke is somewhat disappointing, even as she attempts to appreciate the intellectually and emotionally formative role their friendship had in Modersohn-Becker's emancipation toward her

Parisian identity. As King acknowledges, for this topic the English-reader should turn to Eric Torgersen's *Dear Friend: Rainer Maria Rilke and Paula Modersohn-Becker* (1998). We now also have, in German, Rainer Stamm's new edition of the correspondence between them.⁸ In this context, one of King's factual errors warrants correction. It was not in February 1902 that Modersohn-Becker became disenchanted with Rilke but instead in March 1903, when back again in Paris, she sent her husband one negative comment after the next while evidently spending much important time with Rainer Maria Rilke and Clara Rilke-Westhoff. However, Rilke's commissioned book on Worpswede (1903) had just appeared, without a single reference to Modersohn-Becker. Even as by then she hardly expected inclusion, the book prompted a sad discovery. She observed that his approach to painting was too literary, neither letting himself get close to it, nor allowing the painter to learn from his self-reflective account. In her view, art criticism required clear judgment, one way or the other. Arguably this insight weighed more than her realization of Rilke's selfishness and anxiety not to ruffle the feathers of those he might need one day.⁹ For it meant that Rilke was not ready for her art until years later, and that in 1903 she did not quite belong among either the Worpswede artists' community or her Parisian art friends.

As King broadly covers the current state of research on Paula Modersohn-Becker, some areas in need of scholarly attention emerge along the way. Torgersen's critical reading of her writings is a rare exception to the predominant assumption that they offer unmediated access to her thoughts, experiences and feelings. Yet only a critical examination of her writings deepens an understanding of her search for artistic integrity and success. In 1903 she wrote from Paris probing her own existence now split between Worpswede and Paris. Placating an increasingly concerned Otto Modersohn by including criticisms of the Rilkes, she also wrote affectionate postcards to her stepdaughter Elsbeth and sent grateful greetings to Mathilde Becker, who helped out during her daughter's

absence. Modersohn-Becker was an excellent correspondent and the quickness of her style is not just natural to her but practiced and purposive. Just think of her ambiguously playful questions, “Has Elsbeth grown? Have you?,” ending the letter written during the return trip.¹⁰

The comparisons with Kollwitz, Münter and Werefkin, neither of whom she personally knew, begs the question of Modersohn-Becker’s relations to other women artists. Her friendship with the sculptor Clara Westhoff has received the most attention and King, too, emphasizes it. Yet she knew others, including her Paris-trained teacher in Berlin, the Swede Jeanna Bauck, her Worpswede colleague Ottilie Reylander, and Otto’s student Maria Franck (who later married Franz Marc). In Paris her comments are sometimes derogatory but also curious: her French peers paint the way one painted a century ago; women artists tend to be messy and keep ugly rooms; a Polish fellow student wears men’s clothes. Few of them are named. Did they matter to her or was Clara the exception? Finally, the odd artist couple Paula Becker and Otto Modersohn deserves new attention. King broaches the subject from two angles in her chapters “Marriage to Modersohn and Time in Paris” and “Mother and Child.” Seeing the two topics together, one wonders about the identity of a painter of the monumental female nude, motherhood and many self-portraits who

at age thirty leaves her husband (and stepdaughter) with accusations of intellectual philistinism and sexual repression. What do we make of Otto, who had faith in her art, acknowledged her superiority to him and all Worpsweders, struggled with her self-determination, financially supported her nearly two years in Paris, imposed an absurd, sexless marriage, and finally reconciled with her? Modersohn-Becker’s last words, “What a pity,” suggest that she had confidence in an artistic and personal future in common. What then was to come next in her art? While most biographical outlines end with a photograph of Paula with her newborn to suggest a tragic completeness of her fate, Mathilde Becker instead remembered her daughter resting in a white bed covered with reproductions “of her beloved Gauguins and Rodins,” apparently preparing for getting back to work.¹¹ •

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Notes

1. *Paula Modersohn-Becker und die Kunst in Paris um 1900 – Von Cézanne bis Picasso*, eds. Anne Buschhoff and Wulf Herzogenrath, Kunsthalle Bremen, 2007-2008 (Munich: Hirmer, 2007); *Paula Modersohn-Becker und die ägyptischen Mumienportraits: Eine Hommage zum 100. Todestag der Künstlerin*, ed. by Rainer Stamm, Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstraße, Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen (Munich: Hirmer, 2007).

2. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Letters and Journals*, edited by Günter Busch and Liselotte von Reinken, ed. and trans. Arthur S. Wensinger and Carol Clew Hoey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1990).
3. See Gillian Perry, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Her Life and Work* (London: Women’s Press, 1979); and *Paula Modersohn-Becker in Bremen*, ed. Paula Modersohn-Becker Stiftung in Bremen (Bremen, 1996).
4. Already on Jan. 17, 1901 she writes to Otto from Berlin about sitting “down in a quiet corner next to Verrocchio’s enchanting lady, the one who holds flowers in her slender hands against her breasts” exhibited at Galerie Keller & Reiner. *Letters and Journals*, 232, 491.
5. Diane Radycki, “‘Pictures of Flesh’: Modersohn-Becker and the Nude,” *WAJ* 30: 2 (Fall/Winter 2009): 3-14.
6. *Letters and Journals*, 540.
7. Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina and Gill Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press in association with The Open University, 1993), 35-37.
8. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Briefwechsel mit Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. Rainer Stamm (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2003).
9. March 3, 1903, *Letters and Journals*, 304-306; Eric Torgersen, *Dear Friend: Rainer Maria Rilke and Paula Modersohn-Becker* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1998), 143-54.
10. Mar. 19, 1903, *Letters and Journals*, 315.
11. Buschhoff and Herzogenrath, eds., *Paula Modersohn-Becker und die Kunst in Paris*, 317.

Dangerous Women: The Perils of Muses and Femmes Fatales

by Laure Adler and Élisabeth Lécosse
Flammarion, 2010

Reviewed by Megan Brandow-Faller

While conventional definitions of artistic genius have framed the creative process as an individual male’s solitary battle for creative self-expression, new fields of inquiry probing the contributions of the “significant other”—muses, lovers, friends—to creative genius have revealed more

nuanced models of mutual support and inspiration. *Dangerous Women* rides the coattails of a rich, emerging body of literature on musedom and creativity and partnership. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron’s edited volume *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership* (1993) grew out of the feminist art historical interventions of the late 1970s and 1980s and signaled an important new direction in the conversation on gender and art. In it they profiled case-studies of thirteen artist-couples who “negotiated new relationships to those stereotypes [of masculinity and femininity].”¹ Investigations of gender and artistic collaboration have slowly gained

momentum in the popular and academic press.² By revealing the active contributions made by muses to the creative process, Ruth Butler’s *Hidden in the Shadow of the Master* (2008) constitutes a widely successful reevaluation of the dwarfed partners behind the giants of French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism.³ Collaboration likewise plays an important leitmotiv in Ruth Hemus’s *Dada’s Women* and the driving force in Lesley McDowell’s *Between the Sheets: The Literary Liaisons of Nine 20th Century Writers*.⁴ Such studies have revealed how collaboration shaped the creative output of both partners as well as the ways in which such pairings devi-



Fig. 1. Angelika Kauffmann, *Ariadne Abandoned* (before 1782), oil on canvas, 34" x 28". Gemäldegalerie, Alte Meister, Dresden.

ated from conventional definitions of artist/muse, teacher/pupil, and male/female.

Against this historiographical backdrop, *Dangerous Women: The Perils of Muses and Femmes Fatales* offers the generalist reader lavishly illustrated profiles of iconographic muses and femmes fatales from history and mythology. Adler's introductory remarks frame the profiles to follow as dealing with the dangers of female eroticism and self-awareness in bringing masculinity to its knees. Informed by continental gender theory, Adler concludes that "women in love are dangerous because the power of their desire can disturb the so-called natural

imbalance that has always existed between the sexes since the dawn of humanity" (22). For this reason has the fundamental polarity of perceptions of women between the Virgin Mary and the temptress Eve existed from time immemorial in the Western imagination and art historical canon. This familiar dialectic—the benevolent love of the Virgin Mary and woman's risqué seductiveness unleashed in the Garden of Eden—is referenced constantly in the five sections to follow, illustrating society's simultaneous revulsion and attraction to the "eternal feminine." The introduction then maps out female desire and instances of women with "hearts of men" conquering gendered

fields of sexual power (21). Adler connects the same transgressive power in ancient fertility statuettes featuring exaggerated genitalia with the ironic nicety of Louise Bourgeois's *Filette* (1968), a latex phallus which the artist cradles like a newborn but which at other times hangs menacingly from a meat hook. Not only muses but women artists can be dangerous too.

Dangerous Women is not a scholarly book nor does it pretend to be. Primarily illustrations accompanied by self-contained explanatory texts, it is intended as an easily-digestible format for readers interested in issues of gendered iconography. With an abundance of full-page color plates, the book's images relate to the same themes of sensuality and pleasure discussed in the text. Adler and Lécosse have clearly designed the book to be consumed for enjoyment over erudition, sacrificing depth for pithiness. Yet, in referencing esoteric French discourse in a book intended for a popular audience, Adler's introduction is at once all too theoretical without adequate social-historical contextualization. Readers looking for a straightforward investigation of musedom and how historical socio-cultural factors profoundly influenced the nature of musedom, modeling, and women's professional artistic opportunities over the ages should look elsewhere. At least a brief survey of how the advent of the modern era concurrently retarded and advanced the prerogatives of muses and professional women artists alike would have been welcome. Nonetheless, the authors' revealing analysis of female iconography through the ages, penned in a more seamless narrative style than the introduction, possesses much clout.

Following the introductory remarks, the book proceeds into five sections profiling mythological and historical women as represented in specific works of art: "Woman and Love: Models, Myths and Fables," "Seductress and Enchantress," "Emancipation and Transgression in Love," "Women and Power," and "The Eternal Feminine: Muses, Victims and Femmes-Fatales." While the authors' thematic—rather than chronological or geographical—organization of their material is certainly to be lauded, the boundaries

between these categories are rarely clear-cut. Each section is organized around a one-page preface narrating the themes of the particular section, followed by brief profiles of female archetypes as encountered in specific works of art. Included among the “dangerous women” surveyed here are Greco-Roman goddesses and mortals such as Venus, Juno, and Danaë; literary legends Juliet, Ophelia, and Dante’s Francesca; Eve, Bathsheba, and Delilah from the bible; as well as real-life muses from Heloise to Frida Kahlo. Much of the introductory text acquainting the reader with the feminine arts of artifice, methods of emancipation, self-expression, and agency in amorous relationships, as well as notions of Goethe’s “eternal feminine” leading great artists onward and upward, is helpful and revealing. Yet the peremptory natures of these quick “asides” limits their effectiveness.

The authors’ analysis of real and imagined female archetypes, goddesses, and historical figures—from the Venus of Willendorf to Marilyn Monroe and from Sappho to Ariadne—first paints the mythology surrounding the given figure in broad brushstrokes, then centers in on one artist’s interpretation of the theme. For instance, in analyzing Artemisia Gentileschi’s Uffizi *Judith and Holofernes* (c. 1620), the authors provide a lucid visual interpretation of the image, centering on the poignant violence and drama of Gentileschi’s powerful chiaroscuro, after familiarizing readers with the Biblical Judith. The formula is similar for the rest of the profiles, including the text accompanying Angelika Kauffmann’s *Ariadne Abandoned* (before 1782; Fig. 1). In highlighting the importance of gender and sexuality in Biblical and mythological imagery, Adler’s text stands on solid ground, particularly in terms of analyzing the formal attributes of paintings. That, in the general art historical canon, such gendered imagery is often glossed over in making works fit into broader narratives of stylistic innovation and diffusion is regrettable. *Dangerous Women* thus constitutes an important supplement to analyses centered more on style and allegory than on the gendered implications of such criteria.

Yet, on a greater level, this reader questions the efficacy of the authors’ presenting their material in such compartmentalized profiles as well as their socio-cultural contextualizing of the images. The aforementioned pictures by Gentileschi and Kauffmann represent cases in point. To begin with—a trend holding true for most (though not all) of the profiles—other artists’ interpretations of these popular mythological and allegorical themes are rarely sampled. Different versions of the same theme play little role here; one can only think of Artemisia and Orazio Gentileschi’s multiple versions of the Judith theme. Likewise, though the authors hint at autobiographical factors in scrutinizing Gentileschi’s and Kauffmann’s works, the more interesting questions of creativity and partnership surrounding these female artists’ careers are largely ignored, for example, the ways in which their personal lives both subverted and reinforced traditional gender norms.

Dangerous Women presents the reader with just that: 156 pages of alluring sirens, seductive femmes fatales, and vengeful matrons. Adler and Lécosse cover the taboo subjects of female eroticism and sexual pleasure in a format designed to be leisurely perused. What strikes this reader as more dangerous than the seductive charm of these femmes fatales is the book’s perpetuation of stereotypes of women as objects, rather than creators, of art. Adler’s introductory essay advances notions of the power exercised by women in love. Yet the analogous agency flexed by women as professional artists in creative partnerships, relationships which blurred the boundaries between muse and artist, is not pursued here, nor the notion that men have likewise assumed the role of muse in same-sex or heterosexual pairings. In the 1980s, the Guerilla Girls posed the question of whether “women have to be naked” to get into a major museum. The same question might be asked of *Dangerous Women*. Beyond the publication at stake here, feminist art historians must pursue further work on the voiceless muses of art history as well as the professional women artists that surpassed them. With publications like

Dangerous Women spurring public interest in the subject of musedom, it is to be hoped the scholarly and museum worlds will follow suit in granting greater attention to various modes of creativity and partnership—interactions between artists, models, and muses in which such roles were not mutually exclusive—in shaping art and its histories. •

Megan Brandow-Faller, Adjunct Assistant Professor of History at Brooklyn College/CUNY, has published on musedom and women’s art institutions in late-Imperial and First Republic Austria and teaches courses on women artists and creative partnership.

Notes

1. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, “Introduction,” *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 8 (see review by S. Grimberg in WAJ 17:2 (Fall 1996/Winter 1997): 42-45).
2. See Francine Prose, *The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women & the Artists They Inspired* (New York: Harper, 2003). An exhibition at Cologne’s Wallraf-Richartz Museum also treated the subject; see Andreas Blühm and Barbara Schaefer, *Künstlerpaare: Liebe, Kunst und Leidenschaft* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), with works by artist couples including Judith Leyster and Jan Miense Molenaer, Camille Claudel and Auguste Rodin, Gabriele Münter and Wassily Kandinsky, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, and Marina Abramovic and Ulay.
3. Ruth Butler, *Hidden in the Shadow of the Master: The Model Wives of Cézanne, Monet, and Rodin* (New Haven: Yale, 2008). See review by N. M. Mathews in WAJ 31:1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 50-51.
4. Ruth Hemus, *Dada’s Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); and Lesley McDowell’s *Between the Sheets: The Literary Liaisons of Nine 20th Century Writers* (New York: Overlook Press, 2010).

The Photographic Legacy of Frances Benjamin Johnston

by Maria Elizabeth Ausherman
University Press of Florida, 2009

Reviewed by Robin Rice

Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864–1952) was a pioneering American photographer whose long career helped to shape the practice of several areas of photography. With *The Photographic Legacy of Frances Benjamin Johnston*, Maria Elizabeth Ausherman addresses a lack of comprehensive information about this important artist. At the end of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth, there were groundbreaking opportunities for an audacious, hard-working photographer. Johnston reliably rose to technical and creative challenges in studio portraiture and several aspects of journalistic photography. Ausherman makes a strong case that Johnston's work in the documentation of historical architecture may have produced her most enduring legacy, both as a body of work and through the development of a systematic approach to the subject.

Johnston's privileged education culminated in art study in Paris at the traditional Académie Julien, where many successful American painters including portraitist Cecilia Beaux (1863–1942) also studied. Before her return to Washington, D.C., her family's home, Johnston would have seen a great deal of art, from ancient works to Impressionist painting.

The example of her mother, Frances Antoinette Johnston, "a pioneering newspaper correspondent," was likely a factor in her daughter's early interest in writing (36). Roll film cameras and half-tone printing were introduced around the time the younger Johnston began her journalistic career, and she quickly recognized their importance. She initially illustrated her published articles with drawings but soon turned to photography. Ausherman writes that "Johnston never abandoned the printed work for photography alone," and remained committed to writing to



Fig. 1. Frances Benjamin Johnston, *The Rebel* (1896).

expand photography's communicative range (20–28).

Johnston's seventy-year career might be loosely organized into a sequence of three overlapping genres. The earliest, dominating her work in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, consisted of journalistic news stories and the pictorialist portraits which may be her best-known work today. The latter were often executed in the Washington, D.C. studio she opened in 1890. Her socially prominent family was no doubt a factor in her early success. The portraits of prominent British painters Thomas Gainsborough, George Romney, and Sir Joshua Reynolds as well as the popular Art Nouveau style influenced Johnston's romantic, informal portrait style, in which she emphasized light and relaxed, natural poses. "Study the [subject's] individuality,

striving to keep the likeness and yet endeavoring to show them at their best..." she advised (57). Early in their cordial professional relationship, the leading American pictorialist photographer Alfred Stieglitz exhibited Johnston's work, describing it as "capital," and printed it in the influential magazine "Camera Notes" (54–59). Johnston's tolerance of many different photographic styles and her own eclecticism eventually caused her to break with Steiglitz and the Secession Movement (79).

According to Ausherman, "For Johnston, portraiture was a kind of rehearsal for her later architectural work" (5). Her "photographs of Washington government officials, as well as of nationally recognized cultural leaders often became the standard representations of these individuals"

(38). President McKinley's "Buffalo pose" became the basis of a monument in Ohio as well as a postage stamp. Shrewdly capitalizing on her luck in taking the last photograph of McKinley 17 minutes before he was shot in 1901, Johnston demanded a printed credit line (unusual for that time) and the then staggering fee of \$15 for use of the image (36). She documented news for various publications, and her illustrated essays on the White House and its grounds and the 1893 World Columbian Exposition were both published as books in 1893 (31).

Johnston's mid-career is notable for landscape and garden photography, peaking in the 1920s, and photographic essays related to social and educational projects. These included a successful record of Mammoth Cave (1892-93), a series on schoolchildren in Washington, D. C. public schools (1899), and similar illustrated narratives for other schools, including the African-American Hampton Institute (Virginia, 1899) and Tuskegee Institute (Alabama, 1902), and the Carlisle Indian School (Pennsylvania, 1900). Ausherman praises Johnston's avoidance of racial and ethnic stereotypes and considers that in one series she may have recorded an intentionally "ambiguous" critique suggesting that "the educational process itself perpetuates the oppression of Native Americans" (70).

These explorations of human enterprises in specifically constructed human settings dovetailed with Johnston's understanding of architecture as a singularly profound human document, perhaps richer when unobscured by human activity. The centerpiece of the third and final phase of her career, the one that Ausherman finds most compelling, was "a monumental architectural survey

The meticulous nine-state photographic record of southern American architecture, undertaken between 1927 and 1949, yielded a total of over 20,000 negatives of historic structures within their surroundings" (1).

Ausherman describes Johnston's approach as typically "present(ing) the maximum information possible about the structure in a lyrical way" (175). Photographing plantations, vernacular colonial buildings, churches, and mansions, she subtly explored and illuminated the society that produced them. "Johnston saw the historic buildings and the architecture of the South as fading remainders of the past, disappearing quickly before her eyes and she conceived of her job as 'hurrying on the road ahead of the march of neglect and progress'" (124). She devoted time to research, using old maps and unpublished documents to find significant buildings. "Her work, as a model for federal survey and inventory projects, helped to popularize historic preservation," writes Ausherman (141, 145).

Johnston's 1896 self-portrait *The Rebel* (Fig. 1.) has become an iconic declaration of female independence at the turn of the century. In it, she sits smoking and holding an ornate tankard. Her hiked-up skirts reveal a lot of petticoat and unladylike crossed legs. Ausherman analyzes the setting, Johnston's studio, in detail, discussing how each item reflects her advanced and eclectic taste in arts and crafts and art nouveau pottery and furniture (29-30).

By the 1880s there was already a strong history of women photographers. On the other hand, female photographers generally showed their work in an exclusive (segregated) exhibition category (59-60). Most likely this was the

reason that, although she helped to found a professional woman's business club (36) and acted as curator for several shows of women's photography, "Johnston was resistant to being categorized as a woman photographer" (44). For an exhibition of photographs by American women for the 1900 Paris exhibition, she gave a speech (in French), but did not include her own work (66-68). The exhibition initiated a time of international activity for Johnston, especially in France and in London, then the center of European photography (61).

Architectural photography is clearly important to both the author and her subject. Within her deliberately minimal biographic framework, Ausherman provides good commentary on all the genres of Johnston's oeuvre, but she is most compelling when dealing with the architectural work. She is specific and impressive—even passionate—when contrasting Johnston's use of elevations and perspectives in documenting vernacular buildings with the way these photographic strategies were used by others. She is surprisingly somewhat less specific and less compelling in discussing the relationship of Johnston's early pictorialist photographs to painting. A biographical chronology would have enhanced the book; however, this is a valuable, solid contribution to the history of photography. The book is small (6" x 9.5") for the ideal presentation of images and nearly all of the fifty-six chosen have less than a full page. One would love to see more photographs, although the author's choices and, especially, the decision to include a few comparative examples from Johnston's contemporaries are instructive. •

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

Maria Sibylla Merian & Daughters: Women of Art and Science

by Ella Reitsma
Rembrandt House Museum, J. Paul Getty Museum, Waanders, 2008

Reviewed by Martha Moffitt Peacock

Perhaps what will most delight readers of Ella Reitsma's catalogue are the numerous magnificent color reproductions of watercolors made by Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717), a seventeenth-century artist/scientist/business woman, and her two artist daughters. Indeed, most of the pages of this large-format paperback

catalogue are dominated by color images, including countless details from the works as well as maps, journal pages, early studies (Fig. 1), and other illustrations that illuminate the text. The catalogue accompanied exhibitions by the same name in the Amsterdam and Los Angeles museums. While much has been written since the 1960s about

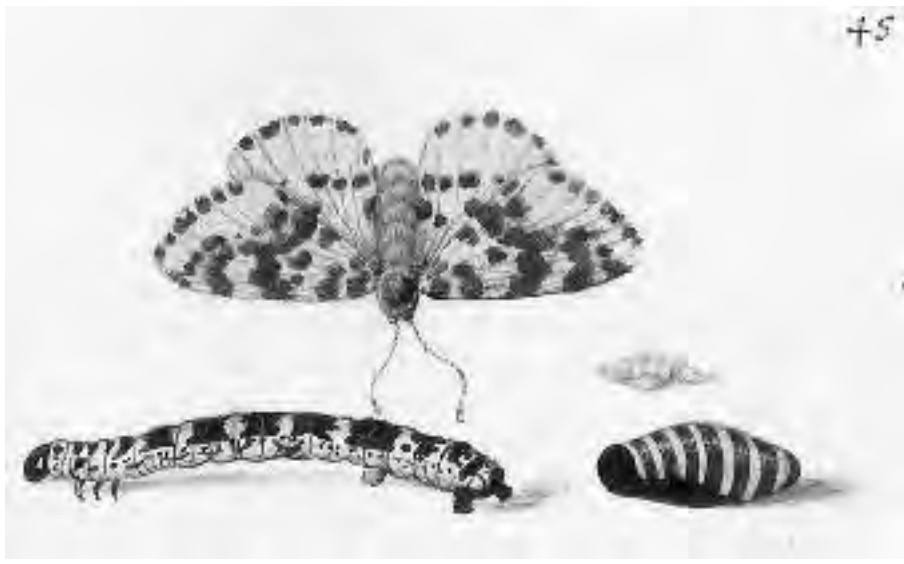


Fig. 1. Maria Sybilla Merian, *Metamorphosis of the Magpie Moth*, watercolor on vellum, 3 1/4" x 4 5/8". Study Book, p. 175/18, no. 15. Library of the Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg.

Merian and her astonishing accomplishments as both artist and scientist, Reitsma's text also investigates the business aspects of her career and how she and her daughters, Johanna Helena Herolt (1668-1728) and Dorothea Maria Gsell (1678-1743), established a successful position for themselves within these male domains. Thus, she also studies the work of Merian's daughters and the working methods of all three women in order to differentiate their styles and tell "a more complete story, interweaving the(ir) life and work" (13). In her attempt to accurately relate the facts of these women's lives, she relies primarily on original seventeenth- and eighteenth-century documents, rather than on the narratives that have developed around the legendary Merian. In spite of this goal, however, she does not emphasize her corrections to past publications, such as the fact that Merian "was a Calvinist, not a Lutheran, that she went to Suriname with her younger, not her older daughter, that she was not sponsored by Nicolaes Witsen, burgomaster of Amsterdam, nor by the scholarly physician and collector Frederik Ruysch, that she did not die in poverty, and so on" (13).

The text primarily follows a chronological path through Merian's life: her early training in the Frankfurt family workshop under an artist father, Matthäus Merian the Elder, and

stepfather Jakob Marrel; her later family life including marriage to the Nuremburg artist Andreas Graff, the births of her two daughters, and divorce; her religious affiliations and her move to the Labadist community in Wieuwerd; the establishment of the family business in Amsterdam, including a detailed description of collaborative working methods, business practices, and patronage; and her research trip to Suriname with a discussion of the resulting publication in 1705, *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium: Ofte Verandering Der Surinaamsche Insecten*, produced after her return to Amsterdam. At times the narrative becomes a little confusing, particularly in the overview chapter, "An Exceptional Life," as elements are mentioned that have not yet been fully introduced in the chronology. An introductory timeline would have been useful. Nevertheless, Reitsma does set out a comprehensive historical context for situating Merian within her cultural milieu in chapters such as "Religious Vocation, Prayer and Research" and "The Family Firm, Amsterdam."

The strengths of this catalogue are clearly its biographical and contextual detail and its stylistic analysis; however, *WAI* readers may be disappointed in the lack of feminist theoretical perspective. In fairness to Reitsma's

stated purpose, she was striving for a book that would be of interest to both the layperson and the specialist. She might have deemed it too problematic to delve too much into art historical, sociological, or anthropological theory of a feminist bent. In her introduction she mentions Natalie Zemon Davis's 1995 *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*, but does little to critique or expand upon Davis's feminist agenda.¹ Surely, it would have been of interest to pursue the question of how "marginal" Merian was, as research focused on gathering the names of seventeenth-century Dutch female artists has yielded some surprising results. The thoroughly researched *Vrouwen en kunst in de Republiek: een overzicht*, for example, reveals that large numbers of women were producing art in this society.² Moreover, many of these women were still-life artists like Merian. As has often been discussed, such an art form was more readily accessible to women, as it did not require large studio space or knowledge of human anatomy. It appears to have been a socially acceptable profession for women artists to pursue. Was this social acceptability, however, also predicated on archetypal connections between women and nature? Moreover, while there were many other female painters of still life, none of these women artists were traveling to Suriname to pursue these interests. What, then, could have been further theorized about Merian in relation to her fulfilling her ambitions regarding the exploration of nature in the West Indies? Was the exotic associated with the feminine in Dutch culture, thus allowing a woman greater access to a realm that was not yet culturally dominated by western patriarchy? Were there differences in the gender associations made with the exotic in the lush and more natural West Indies versus the more patriarchally controlled exotic of the Far East?

Furthermore, questions regarding the societal and cultural precedents that allowed for Merian's success still remain. How was it that Merian was able to imagine and construct her accomplishments within the male-

dominated realms of art, science, and business? For example, although Reitsma thoroughly documents and discusses the Labadist religious community of which Merian was a part, she does not discuss at length how the altered gender norms of this group were an enabling influence on Merian. As this community was heavily shaped by influential females, it would seem that an expanded discussion of famous women Labadists like Anna Maria van Schurmann (1607-78) was warranted. Van Schurmann had already crossed traditional gender boundaries via her scholarly reputation and published writings on the education of women. Attention to such strong female precedents would certainly help explain Merian's accomplishments. An expanded discussion on the great advantage of female patronage in the Dutch Republic would also have benefitted our understanding of Merian's abilities to negotiate her success. As Merian's famous and wealthy patron Agnes Block was also an artist, her support for women artists such as Merian and her daughter Johanna, Maria Moninckx, and Alida Withoos was crucial.

In addition, more attention to the tradition of female rights, education, and business pursuits in the Dutch Republic would greatly aid the theorization of how and why Merian was able to succeed as an entrepreneur. Danielle van den Heuvel has discussed the special status of married women who had the legal right to act as independent traders.³ This was a legal advantage not enjoyed by women in other countries. It is also of relevance to note that in Amsterdam, when a woman

was head of the household, she was most often engaged in some sort of commerce. For these independent women, retail appears to have been a socially acceptable profession. In reviewing contemporary opinion as well as the legal and educational status of women during this era, van den Heuvel concludes that women's capabilities to work in commerce were favorably enhanced. These historical indicators that reveal women as self-sufficient entrepreneurs are supported by the frequent remarks of foreigners throughout the seventeenth century regarding the aggressive and astute business practices of Dutch women. In 1696 for example, Sir William Montague remarks on the large numbers of women engaged in trade in Amsterdam:

't is very observable here, more women are found in the shops and business in general than men; they have the conduct of the purse and commerce, and manage it rarely well, they are careful and diligent, capable of affairs (besides domestik), having an education suitable, and a genius wholly adapted to it.⁴

This comment corresponds rather significantly with Levinus Vincent's warning to an English patron that Merian was "really venal" (204). Thus, it appears likely that even though Merian was born in a German city and had Swiss heritage, she would not have had the same opportunities to fulfill her ambitions, enjoy financial success, and achieve international renown as an artist and scientist had she not come to the Dutch Republic. A long tradition of

learned and independent women established during the early Golden Age certainly helped pave the path for Merian's astonishing success.

Given such reservations, the catalogue will greatly benefit future scholars, as it gathers together a full body of source material on Merian and those whose lives intersect hers in some fashion. Interspersed amongst these chronological highlights are marvelous descriptions of Merian's painstakingly detailed stylistic development. Reitsma's scientific analyses of Merian's images, assisted by entomologist Sandrine Ulenberg, are a valuable contribution to art history. The discussions will help art historians better appreciate Merian's scrupulous working method and the labor involved in this particular art-making process. •

Martha Moffitt Peacock is Professor of Art History at Brigham Young University. She recently authored "Early Modern Dutch Women in the City: The Imaging of Economic Agency and Power" in *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age* (2009).

Notes

1. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995).
2. Els Kloek, Catherine Peters Sengers, Esther Tobé, *Vrouwen en kunst in de Republiek: een overzicht* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1998).
3. Danielle van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship: female traders in the Northern Netherlands c. 1580-1815* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007).
4. William Montague, *The delights of Holland; or, a three months travel about that and the other provinces* (London, 1696), 183.

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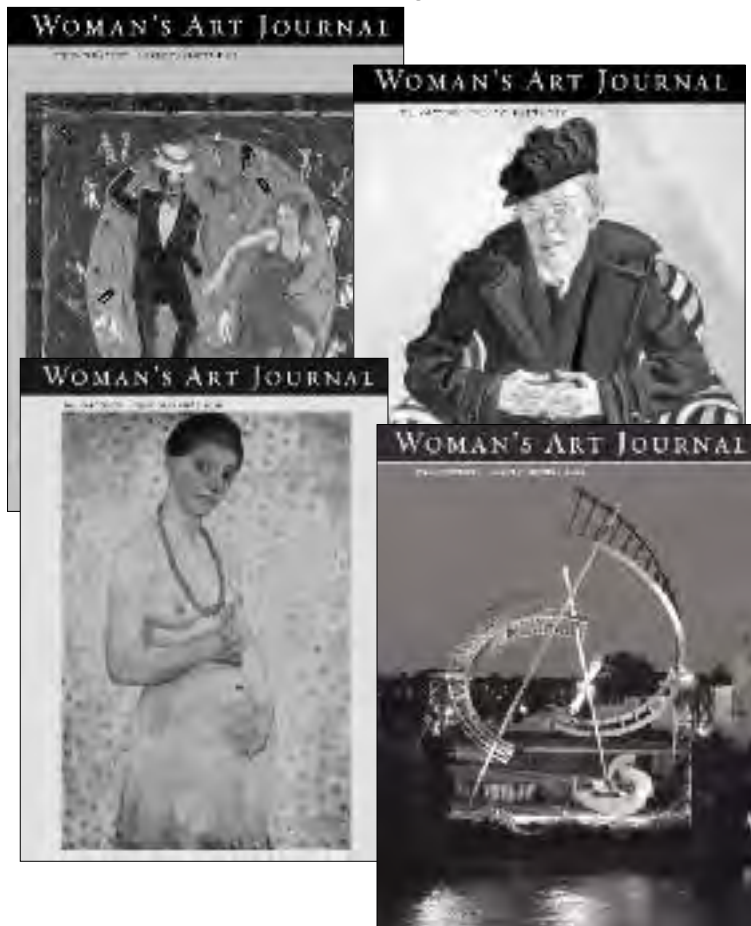
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Pl. 1. Mira Schendel, *Droguinha (Little Nothing)* (1966), knotted rice paper, 26 1/4" fully extended. Collection Patricia Phelps de Cisneros. © Galeria Millan Antonio.



Pl. 2. Eva Hesse, *Untitled (Rope Piece)* (1970), latex over rope, string and wire, dimensions variable. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Courtesy the Estate of Eva Hesse, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.



Pl. 3. Mira Schendel, *Trenzinho (Little Train)* (c. 1965), sheets of Japanese paper suspended on nylon line, dimensions variable. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Pl. 4. Helen Frankenthaler, *Madridscape* (1959), oil on canvas, 102" x 161 1/2". Baltimore Museum of Art: Anonymous Gift BMA 1966.54.



Pl. 4A. Helen Frankenthaler, *Madridscape* (detail) (1959), oil on canvas, 102" x 161 1/2". Baltimore Museum of Art: Anonymous Gift BMA 1966.54.



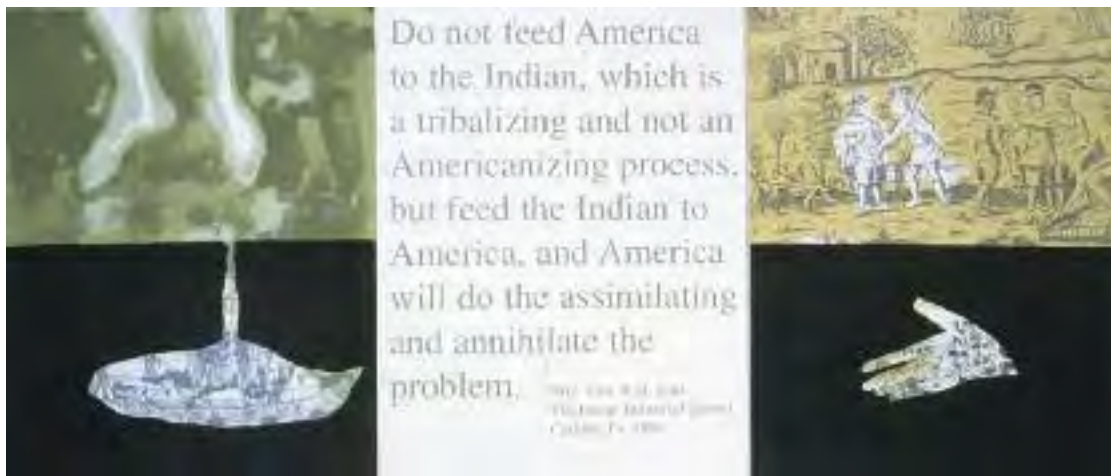
Pl. 4B. Helen Frankenthaler, *Madridscape* (detail) (1959), oil on canvas, 102" x 161 1/2". Baltimore Museum of Art: Anonymous Gift BMA 1966.54



Pl. 5. Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea* (1952), oil on canvas, 86 5/8" x 117 1/4". Collection the artist. On loan to National Gallery of Art, image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Pl. 5A. Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea* (detail) (1952), oil on canvas, 86 5/8" x 117 1/4". Collection the artist. On loan to National Gallery of Art, image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Pl. 6. Lynne Allen, *Colonial Colors* (1997–98), lithograph and silkscreen triptych, 30" x 60". Art and image © Lynne Allen.



Pl. 7. Lynne Allen, *Fringed Bag* (c. 2001), hand-colored etching on deerskin with beadwork and rusted antique purse clasp, 12" x 22". Art and image © Lynne Allen.



Pl. 8. Lynne Allen, *Moccasin #2* (2000), etching on handmade paper, with linen thread and handwork, 4" x 8" x 3". Art and image © Lynne Allen.



Pl. 9. Lynne Allen, *Wind Woman (Ita ta win)*, 2006, digital print with intaglio printed woodcut, 17" x 17". Art and image © Lynne Allen.



Pl. 10. Niki de Saint-Phalle, *Composition* (1956), 10. oil on canvas, 74 7/8" x 51 1/8". Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.



Pl. 12. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Nana noire — upside down* (1965-66), paint and fabric on wire mesh, 59" x 41 1/4" x 42 1/2" © 2010 Niki Charitable Art Foundation.



Pl. 11. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Hon* (1966), fabric on a wire frame, c. 240" x 113". Moderna Museet, Stockholm © 2010 Niki Charitable Art Foundation. Photo: © Hans Hammarskiöld.

Pl. 13. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Léto* or *La crucifixion*
(c. 1965), fabric, paint, and various objects on wire mesh,
96 1/2" x 70". © 2010 Niki Charitable Art Foundation.
Photo: Laurent Condominas.



PL 14. Hildegard of Bingen, from the Rupertsburg *Scivias*
(Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek, Ms 1)
(c. 1165). Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

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