

Chapter One

The politics of theory: *generations and geographies in feminist theory and the histories of art histories*¹

Griselda Pollock

I am the Director of a graduate programme I devised in 1991. Titled 'Master of Arts (MA) in Feminist Historical, Theoretical and Critical Studies in the Visual Arts', its name registers the complex and expanded character of feminist interventions in the study of the visual arts, past and present, including changes in art history, art theory, art criticism and art practice wrought by a range of theoretical and political initiatives. For brevity, it is known as Feminism and the Visual Arts, a phrasing which sets in direct confrontation a tradition of theoretical reflection and social activism by women – feminism, with the theory, history and practices of visual culture. This already breaks the traditional boundaries of art history which segregate that art history from criticism, distancing art history from the production of living culture and thus disavows its own investments in the writing of history. The speciality of the course is the attempt to bring together, in one space, feminist cultural and historiographical theory, studies in the histories of women's work in the visual arts, analyses and practices of contemporary art by women. Thus the course attracts students who are or are aiming to be artists, curators, critics, art historians, as well as women from related disciplines interested in a dedicated study of feminism and cultural theory. It refuses to observe the frontiers between art history and contemporary art practice, between academic theory and the visual arts.

Devising this 'dedicated' feminist course seemed a logical extension of my own work 'as a feminist' and I was convinced that I could no longer offer feminist theory or studies in art and art history as an optional extra on courses framed by other theoretical projects. Feminism's own history and internal complexity as theory and practice demanded its own conceptual and academic space. Until 1991, my work had been housed within the broader project of *The Social History of Art*, within which feminist concerns were a permitted but theoretically underdeveloped subset, often swamped by both the dominance of a materialist paradigm whose main axis of power is class, and by the indifference of the social historian of art to questions of gender and of sexuality. I did not wish to forgo the relevance of a materialist critique for feminist work in art history.^{1,2} But few social historians of art allow feminist analysis to sully the purity of a class-based analysis, which thereby reveals its repressive masculinism.

In the practice of feminist studies, I have been as eclectic as necessary, feminist theory being of necessity a form of bricolage which does not, therefore, show feminism to lack a centre, a core, but rather demonstrates how comprehensive is its theoretical and political vision. It is a common misunderstanding that feminism is a perspective or approach which prioritizes gender over all other structures of oppression. Feminism is not for gender what Marxism is for class, and postcolonial theory for race. First, there is a range of feminisms, in varying alliances with all the analyses of what

oppresses women. Socialist feminism has always concerned itself with matters of class, and black feminism details the configurations of imperialism, sexuality, femininity and racism. In their breadth, as the plural, feminisms deal with the complex and textured configurations of power around race, class, sexuality, age, physical ability and so forth, but they have of necessity also to be the particular political and theoretical space that names and anatomizes sexual difference as an axis of power operating with a specificity that neither gives it priority, exclusivity or predominance over any other nor allows it to be conceptually isolated from the textures of social power and resistance that constitute the social. Feminism has had to fight long and hard to win acknowledgement of the organizing centrality of sexual difference with its effects of gender and sexuality as one of planes of social and subjective constitution.

For many years I have taught from an avowedly feminist position. I have written and researched in ways that reveal my commitment to a feminist politics of knowledge. But now, on this course, I was no longer merely teaching 'as a feminist'. I had to make feminism itself a teaching object. Thus I had to map the various traditions and debates which constitute feminist theories of culture, history and art to produce a pedagogically and intellectually coherent scheme of study. There is a politics in this theoretical project. I had to produce a feminist approach to feminism itself.³

I started my first class by asking a simple question: Why are you here? What has brought you to this course/classroom? I collected a range of responses which proved very revealing. One student, auditing the seminar, stated that she had not signed up for the course because she feared the stigma attached to doing an MA in feminist studies. It is a real question given the institutional categories and disciplinary forms by which prospective employment will be achieved. Another said she wasn't a feminist but felt that there was a lot in feminist theory which was relevant to social studies in the history of art. Between these two positions were those of the fully engaged, often older women, whose experience as mothers or in employment had brought them often painfully face to face with the concrete effects of contradictions which shape women's lives in the classed, raced and gendered structures of western society. For these women, feminism is a practice, the means to make sense of and survive life; it is not theoretical icing on an academic cake. For many of the younger women, it seemed that it was not overwhelming politics which brought them to the seminar room, but a sense that something interesting and important was taking place in something called feminist theory.

The term 'feminist theory' has a wide currency now. But what is it? Does it mean that there is a coherent perspective on all areas unified under the rubric feminism? We cannot really say that we now have feminist art history, feminist sociology, feminist legal studies, feminist cultural studies, as cohabitants of the main disciplinary formations. Isn't feminism more a matter of interventions which change each discipline and theoretical terrain because feminism introduces the repressed question of sex/gender?⁴ Raising that question catapults us from the neatly ordered universe/university of intellectual knowledge with these clear disciplinary divisions into a field of practice. The feminist question – the question of feminism – brings down the dividing and loadbearing walls which compartmentalize academic knowledge to reveal the structure of sexual difference by which society and culture is riven, showing that all disciplines are impregnated with the ideological premises of a sex/gender system.⁵

Feminism as we know it today is, in part, the product of the historical moment in the 1950s/1960s which saw new political, social and cultural theories developed to deal better with the problems posed by late capitalism. The legacy of New Leftism and other political critiques deriving from civil rights movements, black power, anti-racist, anti-colonial struggles and student revolts gave new impetus to the study of ideological practices and cultural forms as being both privileged sites of *ideological* oppression and the place from which to mount *cultural* resistance.⁶ At the theoretical level, New Leftism challenged the idea of culture as Culture – truth and beauty, the best ideas

and values of civilization – by proposing that culture is ordinary, a ‘way of life’, a ‘way of struggle’, the territory of social meanings and identities.⁷ Such displacements of traditional categories of the political to include aspects of cultural practice, identity and custom were deeply sympathetic to a new feminist politics based on the slogan ‘The personal is political’. But this culturalist approach was challenged by French structuralist and post-structuralist theorizations. These proposed a linguistic-philosophical paradigm, derived from Saussure’s initial theory of semiotics. As a result, not only was theorization as an activity raised to new prominence but a creatively theoretical enterprise took off which has reshaped the humanities and the study of cultural practices. In its engagements with and mutual influence on this ‘cultural revolution’, the women’s movement produced an ever growing theoretical wing : an instance of the women’s movement which is known as feminist theory.⁸ But that phrase defines practices and positions which are extremely heterogeneous precisely because feminism has unevenly registered the shifts within, and the changing theoretical paradigms of, culture, society, language and subjectivity, while functioning as an external, hence political critique of all of them.

Furthermore, the term ‘feminist’ functions as a perpetual provocation to women engaged in feminist scholarship, as much as to other scholars and theorists. Feminism demands that certain issues remain in view, and it functions as a resistance to any tendency to stabilize knowledge or theory around fictions of the generically human or the monolithically universal or any other androcentric, racist, sexist, or ageist myth of imperial western culture and its (often not so) radical discourses.

Thus I would assert that feminism signifies a set of positions, not an essence; a critical practice not a doxa; a dynamic and self-critical response and intervention not a platform. It is the precarious product of a paradox. Seeming to speak in the name of women, feminist analysis perpetually deconstructs the very term around which it is politically organized.⁹ This paradox has shaped the history of the last twenty years of feminist practice, which can perhaps be characterized by the passage from essence (a strong sense of the identity of woman and the collectivity of women) to difference (a more anguished recognition not only of that which divides and undoes the collectivity women, but also of the structural condition of the term ‘Woman’ as an effect of psycho-symbolic systems which produce and differentiate subjectivities across the formations of class, race and sexuality). Yet there has been no linear progress from early thoughts to mature theories. Rather we have a synchronic configuration of debates within feminism, all of which have something valuable to contribute to the enlarging feminist enterprise. Yet they are all, none the less, caught up in the very systems of sexual difference they critique. The issue becomes one of how to make that paradox the condition of a radical practice.¹⁰

It does not surprise me, therefore, that after more than twenty years’ involvement in the women’s movement, I should find myself confronting, as a problem of theoretical definition, the question ‘What is feminism?’ This is very different from the more easily answered challenge, ‘Are you a feminist?’ The latter is a matter of personal affiliation; the former an issue of both historical knowledge and critical distance on my own as well as on a collective predicament. I was glad to turn to a collection of essays edited by eminent British feminists such as Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley also asking ‘What Is Feminism?’, a book which included a major article with this title by Rosalind Delmar.¹¹

Delmar begins by pointing out how fractured and heterogeneous feminism – or what now coexists under that umbrella – has become. The representation of this variety of women’s social and political initiatives as ‘feminism’ is itself a recent development, she argues. For the wave of activism which broke out in the late 1960s was initially known as the Women’s [Liberation] Movement. In the gap between the two terms, Delmar questions any automatic identity between them although their interrelationship is a feature of contemporary feminism which has at times named itself the

'second wave', after the activism of nineteenth-century women's campaigns for the vote. That feminism can be separate from a women's movement is both a theoretical matter, which I shall discuss further below, and a matter of history. If the decade of the seventies produced feminism most commonly as campaigns and conferences, in the eighties feminism was housed more often in journals and academic courses.¹² The emergence of the seemingly free-floating term 'feminist theory' indicates this shift of emphasis. Delmar, however, counters the popular identification of feminism exclusively with social activism by arguing that feminism, historically, is a tradition of ideas about 'the woman question' which did not always coincide with politically organized struggles to change the social position of women. Feminism is an address to the philosophical question of sex/gender but it has a discontinuous history because the ways in which the question of sex/gender has been posed were shaped by the prevailing political/philosophical discourses available to women at different historical moments. Thus, in the eighteenth-century moment of revolution, the feminist question was articulated in an Enlightenment discourse on natural rights.¹³ The ideological framework for mid-nineteenth-century suffrage campaigns, however much they claimed descent from eighteenth-century foremothers, in fact derived from then current bourgeois notions of property rights which inscribed hierarchies of class into arguments about women's right to the vote. Thus white bourgeois feminists did not necessarily concur with universal suffrage, but claimed, like their bourgeois brothers and fathers, the right to *represent* their working-class or black sisters.¹⁴

This argument requires us now to confront the ideological frameworks within which our own moment of an enlarged and internally challenged feminism has been formulated. Late twentieth-century feminism looks back for reinforcement to a historical tradition of women's campaigns and political struggles, while organizing itself quite differently. For instance, the language has changed. Liberation replaces emancipation, collectivism displaces individualism, radical political theories and sociologies lead to alliances with the left and anti-racist struggles and, far from focusing on traditionally defined political objectives, our feminisms have coined the new term, 'sexual politics' and the new slogan 'the personal is political'.

The renewed wave of feminisms at the end of this century is a response to the fact that such economic and political reforms as were achieved by the nineteenth-century campaigners did not really alter the deep structures of sexual divisions in society or shift the ideological and psychological structures that they sustained. A cultural revolution was called for which both derived from, and contributed to, the interest in the fields of the cultural, the ideological and the subjective which has characterized radical critical theory and cultural practice in the last thirty years. The key term that grasps the specifically feminist version of this larger discourse is 'the body'. Rosalind Delmar states: 'The pursuit of questions about the female body and its sexual needs has become distinctive of contemporary feminism.'¹⁵ The new feminisms are, in significant ways, a politics of the body – in campaigns around health and the claims for female sexualities, the struggle against violence and assault as well as pornography, the issues of motherhood and of ageing. The new politics articulates the specificity of femininity in special relation to the problematic of the body, not as a biological entity, but as the psychically constructed image that provides a location for and imageries of the processes of the unconscious, for desire and fantasy. The body is a construction, a representation, a place where the marking of sexual difference is written, and it is because the body is a sign that it has been so invested in feminist politics as a site of our resistance. For this kind of feminist theory, the body is precisely a point of transaction between the social system and the subject, between what is classically presented as an intimate or private inside and a public or social outside. The semioticized body, as a figure of political speech and organization, erodes the distinction between that opposition, which has, up to this point, shaped the conception of the politics of liberation.

In the nineteenth century, bourgeois society made gender one of its major social divisions, and represented this as an absolute split between the public and the private, which was figured by rigidly

differentiated bodies, Man and Woman. This polarization incited bourgeois women, ideologically and practically confined to the 'inside', private, domestic sphere, to campaign to enter the public sphere (working-class women were already there and paying the price for their apparent transgression of the public/private gender division through both economic and sexual exploitation). Women demanded the right to be represented as part of the outside, the public sphere — as citizens, as consumers, as users of the public domain. Quite at odds with this position is the twentieth-century feminist slogan 'the personal is political', which insists that the so-called private is in fact already a public space. That is, it is not immune from the play of power. It is not a place of personal refuge but it can be a site of violence and exploitation that penetrate the most intimate pores of the body of the female subject. By that assertion, however, that the public and private spheres are mutually contaminated, feminism has effectively deconstructed the opposition to create the specific territory of its own political and theoretical project.

Let me come at this point from a different angle. The priority of the sexual body and the language of liberation are not unique to feminism. They are shared with a wide range of radical revolts which took place in the 1960s, amongst students as much as among those fighting against racism and colonialism. Generating the 1960s cultural revolutions of the West were important revisions to notions of the self, which fostered a politics of identity, and produced major shifts around notions of consumption and pleasure. The discourse of liberation was, however, posed in the terms of classic bourgeois political theory, namely the conflict between a self seeking liberation from *outside* social constraints, and an *inside*, a self suppressed and oppressed by the social outside. Post-structuralist and critical theory rejected such formulations in favour of arguments in which language, discourse and subjectivity become the key terms for recognizing the imbrication of the self and the social; the idea of the decentred, speaking subject puts the subject as the central effect of social systems identified with language itself. This subject is in fact both spoken and *subjectified* in social and symbolic systems. Language is then the territory in which both the social and the subject are fabricated. Against the power of the linguistic metaphor, however, and its tendency to collaborate with the social order, the insights of psychoanalysis have been used to undermine the status quo precisely by insisting that the decentred subject is in fact a divided or split subject, formed as both conscious and unconscious by the traumas of becoming a human subject in accession to language under a phallogentric law. Psychoanalysis as theory and institution, however, is troubled by femininity, which seems to destabilize the system created by a phallic law. For that very reason, psychoanalysis has been seized upon by feminists because, despite itself, it has offered a theorization of femininity as both always-already part of the social and symbolic systems, yet their perpetual transgressor.¹⁶ Thus semiotics, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis can be shown to have a historic as well as a theoretical connection to feminism because they all involve a challenge to the hegemony of bourgeois politics (i.e. ideas of the autonomous self, a self defined by the public/private split, who is a presumed bourgeois and masculine self), within whose frameworks current feminist questions can no longer be posed. Feminist theory, which often refers to the formulation of questions of sex/gender in the light of these three analytical paradigms, is then to be understood as politically incompatible with those contemporary forms of feminist thought and practice which still inhabit the nineteenth-century, bourgeois problematic of equal rights, which in fact not only suppresses questions of class and race power, but in crucial ways, through the repression of any notion of subjectivity, defaults on the fundamental question for feminism, that of sexual difference.

The combination of semiotics and psychoanalysis, which Julia Kristeva formulated as *semanalyse* is based on a rejection of both the Cartesian legacy of a self who is outside language/society by virtue of a sovereign consciousness and the Marxist tradition of a subject so indelibly social as to be completely determined in its [false] consciousness by structural forces such as social relations

and economic conditions. For Kristeva, the heterogeneous formation of the split human subject in language fissured by the unconscious, a historical and speaking subject with a body, creates the conditions of both the forces of constraint in the social order and those which destabilize the symbolic order by transgressing it in order to renew or to change it. In the essay which most cryptically states this case, Kristeva, however, remains indifferent to the issue of gender and subjectivity.¹⁷ A highly disembodied notion of masculinity and femininity as defining modes of language, rather than as descriptions of men or women, informs much of her writing until her essay of 1979, 'Women's Time', in which she too ponders the history of feminism and its varied enunciations of and on femininity. The historical difference Delmar identified between feminist intellectual history and that of women's movements Kristeva recasts through the allegory of generations.¹⁸ Her use of the idea of time has important repercussions for us all, but notably those involved in that peculiar practice of producing historical studies of culture, art history.

Kristeva begins her essay with an analysis of the modes of time which feminists both inherit and modify. There is linear, cursive, historical time, the time of nations and their histories, the time of politics and rights. Kristeva names a first generation of feminists originating in the nineteenth century but still active in contemporary equal-rights feminism whose object is to join in with this time of the nation. Their ambition to enter the public (*outside*) domain as political subjects and to improve the social and economic lot of women, Kristeva defines as a desire to enter *linear* time, the time of history. It is part of a logic of identification, a desire to be, if not the same as empowered men, then, at least, treated as equal within the hegemonic definitions of power currently enjoyed by privileged men.

On the other hand, there is what Kristeva calls *monumental* time, a temporality more closely associated with what might be deemed specific to women: the time of the body, of cycles, recurrences and the very long *durée* of women's relation to reproduction and its representations. In our period, we can identify a post-1968 generation of feminists who rejected the politics of political ambition, identification with and entry into the public realm and its historico-national time and who turned instead to the specificity of female psychology and the imaginary and symbolic representations of the corporality and sexuality of women, seeking 'to give a language to the intersubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past'.¹⁹ Kristeva is no doubt thinking of authors and writers such as Monique Wittig, Annie Leclerc, Hélène Cixous. What is defined as specifically new to this form of feminism are hitherto neglected sites for radical – or reformulated – ideas of 'political' practice, namely culture, writing as the point of creation of a representation for the feminine psyche and the female, the lesbian and the maternal body.

Going beyond the general histories of feminism, can we not also read the dilemmas of feminist art history in this model of generational conflict and temporal difference in feminism? Feminist art historians desire to reintroduce forgotten women artists into an art historical record which is linear and nationalistic in its formations (French School, American Art, German culture, etc.) and discursive modes (development of western civilization, style, periodization etc.). We try to endow women artists with the canonized artistic subjecthood enjoyed by some men, using a logic of identification to try and render women artists, if not the same as men, at least equal in terms of recognition and respect. Yet the meanings of works produced by women will only become vivid to us when we can articulate what is particular to them, what makes them different from the existing norms, and when we define signifying temporalities quite other than those of styles, movements, avant-garde innovations and so forth. We are searching for ways to acknowledge the 'spaces of femininity' and its subjective temporalities in the rhythms of women's lived experience within and against the hierarchies of sexual difference as that is configured in complex social formations of class, race and sexuality. Can we adequately enunciate the specificity of varied feminine inscriptions in all cultures in terms of art history's prevailing linear discourse on history? I don't think so.

Yet to stress women's specificities outside the terms of some form of historical time and its current discursive enunciations is to risk our continued fixation on the margins as mere ciphers of an ahistorical, or essential, 'difference'. Thus we must follow Kristeva through to her dialectical resolution in order to discover the basis of a *feminist* practice of feminist art history.

Despite being entitled 'Women's Time', and using the generational metaphor, Kristeva's concluding section shifts from the temporalities of femininity and feminism to reconceptualize both in terms of *space*.

My usage of the word 'generation' implies less a chronology than a *signifying space*, a both corporeal and desiring mental space. So it can be argued that as of now a third attitude is possible, thus a third generation, which does not exclude – quite to the contrary – the parallel existence of all three in the same historical time, or even that they be interwoven one with the other.²⁰

Leaving aside for the moment Kristeva's third space at its own theoretical level, I would like to play for a while with the metaphors of time and space as ways of understanding the feminisms of which we are a part and which we embody in our heterogeneous practices 'as feminists'. What is specific to Kristeva's formulation of space is that it is semiotic. It is inscribed with meanings and is also the site of the production of meanings that transgress existing social and symbolic orders. Feminism is not just a discontinuous history of ideas or cultural expressions on the one hand, or a history of movements and campaigns for social change on the other. Feminism can be reconceived as a signifying space, the space in which, through a feminist imperative, we both negate existing orders of phallogentric meaning, and in struggle with representation, generate critical, even new, meanings. Since the subject is in a sense the effect of the meanings a culture, its symbolic order, allows to be signified, the battle for meaning is also a struggle for kinds of subjectivity. As women, we are derelict, or in exile, in a symbolic order that does not signify us except as a sign of its own, phallogentric meanings. Thus to call feminism a signifying space is not to retreat from politics, but to lodge them at a different level that might be able to articulate the crucial relations between subjectivity and sociality which is a critical axis of contemporary power.

Feminism re-emerged as part of the signifying spaces created since 1968 which have shaped new notions of the self, gender, sexual difference, as well as creativity, art and representation. Kristeva introduces into political discourse the notion of modes of production as signifying the temporalities of productive relations, while there are also, discontinuous with them, temporalities of signification and of the subject, and hence of sexual difference. Thus *sex/gender* is not ahistorical, apolitical, or merely private. But it can only be historically and theoretically thought about by acknowledging its specific temporalities, and the terrain on which it most formatively functions – language and sexed subjectivity.

From this apparently disconnected discussion of Kristevan and related theories, I want to derive an important conclusion for preparing the course on Feminism and the Visual Arts. Such a course could not begin by uncritically narrating a history of ideas or of events and campaigns or artists and movements. It is necessary to start by mapping the historically specific and varying enunciations of feminism as elements of spaces and temporalities of sexual difference. Cartography is known, of course, as a major instrument for the production of interested knowledge through its relative projections of space and the inscription of perspective. The world is always mapped from a position of (attempted) mastery.²¹ A mapping of feminist theory appears already to exist with its own concrete geography. There are traditions of American feminism quite distinct from those in France, Scandinavia, Germany, Italy, Japan, Chile and Britain. Political and theoretical conflicts are represented in feminist literature as national differences. There is, however, a North Atlantic hegemony – a question of influential European languages. French and Anglophone feminism have become more internationalized than Scandinavian or German tendencies. In her article, 'Feminism,

Postmodernism and Style: Recent Feminist Criticism in the US', Toril Moi responded to criticism of her book *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) for its apparent omission of a specifically transatlantic tendency in American feminist criticism which orients itself towards French post-structuralism. She coins the phrase 'Atlantic post-feminism' to define the in-between state of writers such as Alice Jardine, who, in her book *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985), seems to hover above the Atlantic, looking towards France and speaking to America. The apparent ease with which we can map such a geography for contemporary feminist theories hides more fundamental conflicts than the appropriate national or intra-national location of theoretical tendencies. The danger, argues Moi, is that feminisms will reduce to a question of style – with feminist theory turning the political insights about language and subjectivity into a debate about styles of writing and self-presentation. Toril Moi wants, rightly, to insist that feminism poses instead the question of the *politics* of theory. Of her own position, as a Scandinavian feminist, with strong connections to a British socialist feminism, Toril Moi writes: 'In general I would characterise my project, both here and in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, as an effort to argue for a *politicised* understanding of feminism as opposed to a *depoliticised* one.'²² In the conclusion to her article, writing about another mid-Atlantic post-feminist, Jane Gallop, who most vividly reduces the content of feminism to a matter of style, Toril Moi states:

Jane Gallop is right to claim that to take up a style is to take up a position, but she is wrong to recommend a single stylistic move as uniquely feminist, just as she is wrong to assume that style can be analysed without regard to content and the specific historical space where it makes its intervention. I have already argued that to take up a political position is to risk being wrong. In the same way we may find ourselves lumbered with the wrong style in the wrong place. The risks of style are also the risks of political commitment.²³

Theoretical developments within the contemporary moment of feminist intellectual history, therefore, have to be screened and examined for their political effects. The choice of argument or theory is not just a matter of varying styles of art history, for they will have political effects whether or not they are intended or recognized. Feminist art history is thus susceptible to a similar critique to that mounted by Toril Moi of literary criticism. I could put it thus: not everything that feminists undertake is automatically feminist – if we understand feminism as interventions in signifying practices which are politically effective in a situation in which feminism itself has altered the very definition of the political away from accession to public rights towards understanding of the conditions and effects of our formation as sexed, speaking subjects.

This general discussion leads back to my own dilemma in formulating an academic course on feminism and the visual arts. Not for the purpose of confession or egotistic self-advancement, I would like to introduce some biographical information as index of my own recognition of being the product of historical processes and conditions. As academic and feminist, I was formed by the late 1960s reconfiguration of feminism as the Women's Liberation Movement. I became involved in feminism slowly and interruptedly. At the age of fourteen, I read Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1962) when my father brought it back from a business trip abroad, thinking it a suitable manual for a young girl about to enter the mysteries of femininity. I was enthralled by this early feminist text. Despite my having not yet been caught in the traps Friedan so movingly exposed, I could identify with the horrors of the feminine mystique through my recently deceased mother, who had been thus 'wasted', in contrast to some of her friends, who had fought to go to university in the 1930s and to have professional careers but had been obliged to forgo marriage and children because of the complete prohibition on married women working in their chosen careers, teaching. Their generation was a sort of link in a chain back to the nineteenth-century suffrage feminists. At university myself in the late 1960s, I was quickly and negatively identified as a feminist, because of my intellectual interests and my refusal to sabotage my intelligence in pursuit of a man of my own. Intellect and femininity were not compatible on the scale of social or sexual

success. I therefore tried hard for a while not to be a 'feminist'. But in 1970, the students at my university, inspired by the events of 1968, organized an occupation of the administration and this was the first major political action in which I became involved. It coincided with the first Women's Liberation conference in Britain, on the theme of history, significantly, held at Ruskin College, Oxford, in March 1970.²⁴ Women from the conference came to lend solidarity to our occupation. I remember how I looked out at these 'women's libbers' with mixed feelings, having buried my interests in Friedan and de Beauvoir and read sensational newspaper articles about Valerie Solanas and women burning their bras. When I left university that summer, however, I decided to seek out a women's group – itself a novel phenomenon, an informal network of local groups co-ordinated through one office and a London magazine. The women's movement offered an authenticity to my politics as a radical but middle-class woman. I could act and speak in my own voice, seeking alliances and links through varying yet also common experiences of oppression. This was clearly a movement of bourgeois, white, equal-rights feminism, disguised in the new languages of consciousness-raising and identity politics. The legacy of an earlier movement of suffrage politics remained strong in the group I joined, which decided to take on the state and campaign for equal rights legislation. Public meetings were organized, women's groups lobbied, and a women's newspaper founded and edited. All this took place while I went to study art history at the Courtauld Institute of Art, in protest against using a good education as a secretary in publishing or in market research – the career options I was advised to adopt.

I was in a group of highly motivated students and one week we had a slide test which we all passed with nine correct answers out of ten. One image defeated us. We could date it, define it as a post-Impressionist work produced in Paris, etc., etc. We were completely unable to name its author, Suzanne Valadon, because it never occurred to us to search our extensive art-historical databases for a woman's name. The shock, not only of my academically condoned ignorance of women as artists, but of the impossibility, within the existing framework of art history of imagining women as artists, led me to invite Linda Nochlin to speak at the Courtauld Institute in 1973. It was the first feminist lecture ever given there, the first time women artists were named and considered seriously. As a result I recognized there was a politics to be engaged with, in this my 'private' professional area as well as in the typically public spheres of Parliament and the media. Coincident with this event was the attempted prosecution in London for obscenity of the Swedish artist Monica Sjoo, for the exhibition of her painting, *God Giving Birth*.²⁵ A public meeting was organized and as a result a new group formed, the Women's Art History Collective. A typically feminist group of that date, an informal auto-didactic collective, we affiliated with the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union, to locate ourselves not as a professional pressure group but as part of a political and social movement, in which women organizing for themselves, none the less, saw themselves in alliance with other radical movements in and beyond the arts. Significantly, artists were organizing politically and art was being recognized as politically involved institutionally, economically and ideologically.

Across these various spaces – the stronghold of academic art history, the informal meetings of the Collective in someone's front room, the visitors' balcony of the Houses of Parliament – I began to forge a practice, not *in* art history, but *on* art history from within the signifying space of the women's movement. Long before we systematically read the work of Michel Foucault, many women recognized that knowledge was an intimate associate of power. Art History as a form of knowledge is also an articulation of power. What it says and what it disallows affects many living artists who are negated simply because they are women, a term art history has made antagonistic to that of artist. My project on art history was then to write histories of and for the present; to write in the real as well as symbolic presence of female people, who, living under the sign Woman, in a phallogocentric culture, suffer the real and material injuries of class and race through the configurations

of gender. The theoretical journeys that I have undertaken have a constant point of reference. They are tested against political questions and priorities: why is it important to undertake this research, this paper, this book, in terms of the present configurations of power? In this way I refuse one of Art History's key divisions by which it polices the boundaries between the past and present. Art History argues that the distance of time alone validates historical enquiry. 'The only good artist is a dead man.' The present, argues Art History, is too close and cannot be objectively assessed. I would argue that all history writing is formed in the present. The politics of historiographical practice belongs to the ideological moments of its own production. Furthermore, it is vital to show that the present is historically shaped. Sexual difference and sexual divisions in society are not natural but historical and that is why they can be challenged and changed. The past as Tradition – in Art History it becomes the Canon – is used to justify the present status quo. Validated by time, the canons of great art brook no discussion or serious reconsideration. Feminist interventions have to disrupt canonicity and tradition by representing the past not as a flow or development, but as conflict, politics, struggles on the battlefield of representation for power in the structural relations we call class, gender and race.²⁶

Over the last few years there have been many review essays and analyses of feminist activities on art, art criticism and art history. Mostly in feminist journals, these provide a valuable documentation of what are often scattered and disparate activities. But these are not just a matter of information. As representations of feminist art historical practice, they are themselves historical texts, shaped both theoretically and politically by their ideological position. In 1987 the prestigious American art history journal, *The Art Bulletin*, finally admitted feminism into the canon of art history by publishing in its series of reviews of the state of the discipline a review article by Thalia Gouma Peterson and Patricia Matthews on 'The Feminist Critique of Art and Art History'.²⁷ Their compendious study is invaluable as a bibliographic reference text. As well as being a valuable archive, the text significantly undertook to map out the main tendencies and debates in feminist art history and criticism since 1971.

I have to say that I like the essay, because it has a lot of nice things to say about British feminist art history and about my work in particular. I want, however, to read the article symptomatically for the problematic – the framework – within which it is produced. This is not a covert criticism, a means of disagreeing with the authors' conclusions. We need to debate our field, and respond to all projects, especially when their value as historical record must be qualified by acute awareness of their status as representation. The article in the *Art Bulletin* exhibits some correspondences with the texts of Toril Moi and Julia Kristeva, notably using both the generational metaphor and the idea of a geography for feminism. Yet the text becomes most uncomfortable when it has to name the political nature of the differences between the generations and the geographies. These terms fail to enlighten and become a means of flattening out, depoliticizing the struggles between feminisms within (and against) art history.

According to Thalia Gouma Peterson and Patricia Matthews, the geography of feminist art history spans the Atlantic. America versus Britain is the main axis of difference. There are also two generations of feminists with different theoretical positions and projects which traverse a symbolic ocean. The geographical and the generational divisions overlies each other, however, to produce the authors' concluding arguments about American foremothers and British daughters – a curious reversal of the Old World/New World division in which some white American women once called themselves 'Daughters of the Revolution'. Despite the dynastic approach, there is no real genealogy in the Foucauldian sense of excavating the conditions of discursive formations and the systematic dispersion of the objects of new discourses.

The generation gap seems political. The first, American, generation is presented as ultimately conservative, revisionist, celebratory and empirical in its scholarship. The second, British, genera-

tion is 'radical' (a euphemistic term), interventionist, and above all theoretical in its scholarship. The division between feminism as ideas and feminism as movement we have already encountered is thus relocated in both time and space: the founding American feminist art historians represent 'movement', while the younger feminist Brits represent 'theory'.

This division occurs because, I suggest, there is a profound confusion created by the frequent use of one term, 'methodology'. This recurs repeatedly in the later sections of the essay. Second-generation feminist art criticism exhibits 'a more consistently radical critique of traditional methodologies' (346); 'a debate concerning methodology has recently erupted in art-critical circles between these two groups' (347); 'contemporary art critics among the second generation bring a feminist perspective to their use of new Postmodern methodologies of poststructuralism, semiotics and psychoanalytic criticism' (349), and finally, 'just as with art-critical methodologies, so feminist art-historical methodologies differ according to one's ideological position which is itself often conditioned by nationality' (350). Both politics and theories disappear into the umbrella term 'methodology', which defines a procedure for doing the job of criticism or art history. The important questions about what frames or motivates the 'doing' are not asked. This is not to propose an opposition between theory and practice. There is no practice without an informing theory, even if it is not fully recognized or acknowledged, and theories are only realized in practices. Methodology only becomes apparent, that is different from the normalized procedures of the discipline, when a different set of questions is posed and demands new ways of being answered. Thus, until feminism emerged, along with social and materialist histories of art, methodology was not really a major issue for Art History. Art History was practised in the masters' schools – Panofsky and iconography, Wofflin and formalism, and so forth. If I ask a question about women's apparent absence from the art-historical record, however, a question which derives from interests at odds with the status quo in Art History, I need a different way of thinking and researching in order to answer it, since the present practices of Art History not only suppress knowledge of women artists but disallow the very idea of women being 'artists' in the canonical sense of the word. The ideological project of the discourse of art history is to render masculinity and creativity naturally synonymous.²⁸ Thus in *Old Mistresses*, Rozsika Parker and I had to make Art History itself the object of ideological critique – showing how it served the interests of an unacknowledged sexual hierarchy. Methodological novelty is only, therefore, a symptom. It is not the real force changing art criticism and art practice. Methodological issues are the symptom of a political conflict waged at the level of both cultural discourse and the representation of culture. The authors of the *Art Bulletin* review article actually quote Lisa Tickner: 'feminism is a politics, not a methodology' in the only sentence that admits of a feminist 'engagement with *theory*' (my italics).²⁹ Yet the authors are inhibited from examining the implications of the statement because feminism doesn't function as a politics in their text; it is unconsciously depoliticized by its history's being represented in terms of generational and geographical differences.

I want to explain how the engagement between feminism and semiotics, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis arose not as methodological icing on a disciplinary cake but as necessary ways of thinking about issues and problems which actually confront us in both social practice and the contemporary study of culture. Theorization is not a cerebral exercise, remote from political necessity, designed to terrorize the uninitiated. It is an inevitable component of a political practice. How do we understand the problems we have to experience as women in all the concrete diversity of that term, and how do we understand the oppression of 'women' historically? How do we understand the condition Woman, sexual difference, social injustice, in ways which render it possible to resist and change? How do these structures inform cultural representations? What part do cultural representations play in the enactment of these structures and the production and reproduction of relations of power and difference? To call such theoretical enterprises 'methodology' is to cut art

history off again from that larger framework of social practice and cultural history, from feminism as something larger than feminist art historians or art critics. It keeps us at the level of 'Are you a feminist [art historian]?' as opposed to 'What is feminism?' and what does feminism do to art history and all existing formations of knowledge?

The authors of the *Art Bulletin* article have, moreover, considerable problems with their framework. Lucy Lippard appears as both a first- and a second-generation writer. Lisa Tickner appears similarly in both contexts. The discussion of various readings of the work of Nancy Spero is indicative. Spero is presented as a first-generation artist, criticized by second-generation critic, Jane Weinstock. Spero then defends herself by reference to her interests in French feminist theory, and is indeed appraised in thoroughly second-generation terms by Lisa Tickner. Because the authors themselves have not engaged with post-structuralist theories of reading and authorship, they cannot resolve the apparent confusion here by recognizing that 'Spero' is a quite different entity according to the text/critic (herself included) by which she is represented. In typical Art History, which is often essentialist in terms of its notions of human and artistic nature, there is an elision between the person, the social producer and the author produced by the text, an elision which is signified by the artist's proper name. From a post-structuralist vantage point, there is no essential 'Spero-ness' conferred upon the works by virtue of their being proprietorially named 'Nancy Spero'; there are readings of the work, empowered by radically different interests and theoretical resources. Thus Tickner can 'read' Spero for her exhibition at the ICA in London in 1987 in the light of French feminist theory about 'écriture féminine', recalling Kristeva's second generation: 'these women seek to give a language to the intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past.'³⁰ In part this is a result of the historical development of the feminist theory precipitated by the historico-politico-cultural moment of 1968 which focused on issues of the body and subjectivity. We now have the terms to appraise women's inscriptions in culture in ways which acknowledge the specificity of the corporeal and psychic conditions of femininity without being trapped philosophically in an essentialism which is what Weinstock – an ardent user of psychoanalysis, a French-orientated American critic – reads into Spero's own statements about her practice. The difference, then, between Kristeva's use of the generational metaphor and that of Gouma Peterson and Matthews becomes pointed precisely in the latter's inability to see theory as materially altering what we can now do because of what we can now think. Instead, the American authors present the feminist critique of art and art history as a sequence of different ideas or traditions, some being seen as overtly theoretical and others less so. In their article, the term 'theoretical' operates as a euphemism for 'ideological' in the absence of adequate theorization of how, at the level of knowledge, we effect changes through being able to contest the significations of femininity. Thus the generational imagery of this text ultimately creates a linear history with hidden assumptions about progress, evolution and development in place of a grappling with theoretical difference as a conflict within feminist theory and its politics.

The metaphors of first and second, American and British, overlap with young and old to create false impressions. Although I would not dare to underestimate the immense courage and influence of Linda Nochlin in making possible the feminist interventions in art history, I think it is misleading to give the impression that Lisa Tickner and I were not as much involved in the beginning of the project in the early 1970s, even though I was then a young graduate student, and Linda Nochlin an established professor at Vassar. The break from art history into feminism for us all was independent of age or stage. It was the possibility created by the opening up of a space called the women's movement. Furthermore, I do not see the fracture between American-dominated positivist feminist art history in the 1970s and British-dominated theorized art history in the 1980s. My work of 1977 is quoted in discussion of first-generation art criticism, while as an art historian I am placed at the end of the second generation. In addition, I derive much inspiration from the

work of Carol Duncan, writing feminist-Marxist analyses as early as 1973. Her article on 'Virility and Male Domination in Early Twentieth Century Vanguard Art' in *Art Forum* (December 1973) was a complex analysis of representation and sexuality in terms which are as pertinent and powerful today as when they first appeared. Why fetishize named theories, such as semiotics and psychoanalysis, privileging them over politically framed analytical thought derived from another theory, Marxism, unless the present respectability of theory in the American academy derives precisely from its having become depoliticized in its translation from France and Britain? I sense that fashion is playing a distorting part, making deconstruction and psychoanalysis more acceptable as 'theory' than the traditions of materialist social histories of art deriving from the pre-Cold War 1930s and renovated in the 1970s. One remains politics and is not allowed a theoretical input while what is called theory is denied a political import.

When Rozsika Parker and I wrote *Old Mistresses* (planned in 1974, begun in 1976, completed in 1978, though only published in 1981 because of the bankruptcy of the commissioning publishers), we had not yet become formally acquainted with deconstruction. Yet, the text exhibits tendencies that make it a deconstructive text, a reading of the discourses of Art History, exposing what they say beyond the surface of what is written. Equally, our text used an Althusserian model of symptomatic reading of Art History for its structuring absences and the informing ideological frameworks. The project was not driven by theories but by specific questions raised by feminism for the practice of research, teaching and writing about art. In retrospect, we can recognize more and more of its resources and recognize how ideas with which we were not directly familiar none the less percolated down to us as part of a conversational community of radical and feminist writers. The book was an attempt to enunciate the social contradictions of gender in a specific site, Art History. It was a result of the signifying space of the women's movement, which was producing ways to articulate the issues of sexuality, subjectivity, gender power and pleasure. From within that framework, we could argue that women had never been outside the realm of art, i.e. our version of the public sphere. They were always-already within it, though 'woman' was structurally positioned as a negative term in opposition to which 'masculinity' established its dominance and exclusive synonymy with creativity. The stereotypical construction of femininity is not *essential* in a biological sense, but, to use the word differently, it is essential, that is, necessary, to the discursive production and perpetuation of the hierarchy we call sexual difference.

Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology, with the word 'ideology' in its subtitle, was enabled by the currency of Althusser's formulations about ideology. These stressed that ideas neither float in the free space of idealism nor are a matter of consciousness, false or otherwise.³¹ Althusser specified ideology as a material practice in so far as the production of both meanings and subjects for meanings and social positions takes place in the social practices and institutions such as the family, the school, the church, the media, the university. This, combined with Foucault's definition of discourse and discursive formations, which equally have an institutional site through which objects and subjects of discourse are constituted, made possible the identification of art history as a discourse, practised in specific institutions, from art history departments to publishing houses, from museums to gift shops. If discourse is the product of social practices, the burden of discourse is the shaping, the disciplining of subjects for the regimes of social power. In both Althusserian Marxism and Foucault's discourse theory the issues of social power pass through the field of the subject and the sign: these will be precisely the site of Julia Kristeva's feminist reorientation towards imagining revolutionary change through sexual difference.

It is highly significant that, in their listing of theories misrepresented as methodologies, Gouma Peterson and Matthews include neither Althusser on ideology nor Foucault on discourse. The only reference indeed to ideology is locked into a quote from *Old Mistresses*. This is a significant, indeed a symptomatic, repression in their text. It indicates the ideological limits of the argument by mark-

