

PREFACE

This book poses the question ‘What is the canon?’ from a feminist perspective, exploring the problems canonicity presents for feminist interventions in the field of art’s histories at the level both of the exclusivity of the canon and of canonical interpretations and methodologies. Always embedded in feminism’s encounter with the story of Western art that has become institutionalised in museal, scholarly and published art history, the question of a single standard of absolute, transhistorical artistic value embodied in the outstanding, exemplary, representative yet universalistic artist has presented major historiographical and theoretical problems. How could different narratives, models or identities intervene in what is generally accepted to be art’s history without merely confirming the endless play of the One and its Other? Can the difference of the ‘feminine’ make a difference to what we learn from the cultural past? Can we escape the idealised Story of Great Men without longing for Heroised Women?

Since 1971, when Linda Nochlin first proposed that ‘the woman question’ transcended the local partisanship of setting the record straight by re-instating some ‘old mistresses’, feminists have been struggling to effect the paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of cultural histories and artistic practices that Nochlin saw as feminism’s possibility and responsibility. I am a product of that moment of intellectual adventure and political reawakening in the 1960s whose result, for the first time in history, would be a sufficient number and density of women within academe and related professions not merely to effect an increase in token numbers but to create a theoretical and cultural revolution that has reshaped every discipline and practice it has touched. Since feminism and my academic interest in the history of art first collided, the questions of why women and art are set in contradiction by modern culture and how to challenge that discursive and ideological structure has shaped my work in as much as against art history. In this book, a return to the historiographical and theoretical terrain first charted in Rozsika Parker’s and my *Old Mistresses: Women, Art & Ideology* (1978–81), I propose a dual strategy. Reading selected case studies predominantly from the historical moment of early European modernism through the theoretical prisms of contemporary feminist thought, I interrogate visual representations from that historical moment in the late nineteenth century for insights into the historical legacy of modernity that itself prompted and necessitated a feminist

revolt and re-vision: the feminist modernisation of sexual difference. Sexuality, subjectivity and representation form a critical set of inter-relating issues for feminist cultural analysis of visual representations that traverse the terrains of desire, fantasy and ambivalence for which a concurrent modernisation of psychology – psychoanalysis – provides the theoretical terms. It seems a feminist necessity to attempt to hold in tension and creative dialogue both a historical and social analysis of the semiotics of representation and an attention to the psycho-symbolic level of subjectivity and its enunciations in aesthetic practices.

The first part, *Firing the Canon*, engages in the so-called ‘culture wars’. Proposing that the canon should be understood as both a discursive structure and a structure of masculine narcissism within the exercise of cultural hegemony, I examine the theoretical and political issues involved not in displacing the canon but in ‘differencing’ the canon, exposing its engagement with a politics of sexual difference while allowing that very problematic to make a difference to how we read art’s histories. The second part, *Reading Against the Grain*, is about reading strategies, using case studies of two artists who are men – Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec – to explore how a feminist reading of canonised artists can yield a different reading of their representations of women, and hence of masculinity as an ambivalent psychic position of cultural enunciation. Both artists enjoy a mythic status in both art history and popular culture, each for radically different reasons. Their lives and works sustain the mythology of the suffering hero of modern art. Framing their practices at the intersection of histories of sexuality and modernity around the figure of the Mother, I argue that the repressed questions not only of gender but of sexuality and sexual difference should be acknowledged as critical elements of both the content and the form of canonically acknowledged modern art and art history.

Starting at the heart of canonicity confronts the strategies of introducing difference into the canon so as to avoid two dangers. The first danger, the ghettoisation of feminist studies in art history because of an exclusive focus on art made by women, underplays feminism as a comprehensive perspective from which to reconsider the very constitution of the study of all of art’s histories. The second danger is the corollary of the feminist adulation of its reclaimed ‘old mistresses’: namely, the unrelenting critique of masculine culture. My concern is to read some art by artist-men with a merciful irony, which is also self-irony, in order to establish the way consciously *feminist*, as well as unconscious *feminine*, desire can reconfigure canonical texts for other readings.

The third part, *Heroines*, takes on the problem of ‘Setting Women in the Canon’ by looking at feminist investments in the work and much abused biography of a seventeenth-century painter, Artemisia Gentileschi. Subjecting feminist writing to an equally critical self-analysis, I conclude that we must take responsibility for feminist fantasies and mythologies created around the woman artist by feminist discourse. Because the exact contents of Artemisia Gentileschi’s oeuvre are still so unstable as a result of the predicament of the woman artist in the archive and in art history, we can ask ourselves: What are we looking for in the work we assume to be ‘by a woman’? What would be the signs of difference – if we refuse the notions of authorship and

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expressivity that sustain ordinary art histories? Can self-reflexive reading for differentiations rather than the projective attribution of an absolute difference derived from preconceived ideas of gender have a place in an art historical practice? Shifting from the project of reading 'as a woman', I propose reading for the 'inscriptions of the feminine' to create a 'view from elsewhere' (De Lauretis). Focusing on four paintings by Artemisia Gentileschi that feature a woman's body as the core of a complex narrativity around sexuality, trauma, bereavement and imaginary identification – *Susanna*, *Judith*, *Lucretia* and *Cleopatra* – I offer possible readings of her work 'against the grain of' both feminist celebration and canonical sensationalism.

In working on this section, I draw upon the work of Mieke Bal whose semiotic and narratological study of Baroque history painting provided a series of profound theoretical insights into how images are processed by their viewers and how we might formulate a politics of self-conscious and politically accountable cultural *reading of images*.¹ Bal fashions a new concept, *hysterics*, to describe a feminist poetics that conjoins semiotics and psychoanalysis. A *hysterical* reading attends to the rhetoric of the image rather than to the plot it seems to illustrate, preferring to focus on a revealing detail rather than the overall proposition, and it leads us to identify imaginatively with the victim rather than see the event through the eyes of the usually male protagonist. As a counter-strategy, *hysterics* exposes the implicit and misogynist violence within representation that canonical readings condone and naturalise.

But, if difference is not just to be a replication of phallogentric ideologies of *the* difference – based on a reified heterosexual opposition Man versus Woman – it must acknowledge the divisions within the collectivity of women that produce real, antagonistic conflicts shaped by modernity's imperialist and racist face. The section on Gentileschi and the possibilities of narrative figurative representation in the Western tradition lead to discussions of other axes of difference. A chapter on the work of the contemporary British artist Lubaina Himid examines the struggle for articulation of postcolonial black femininities repressed by white feminist discourse as much as by the canons of imperialism. How are feminist interventions in art histories with their almost all-white canon to respect that difference in ways which make the histories of black women artists part of the expanded cultural text of other modernities and other modernisms? Can we also desire alliance without negating the differences which are our specific historical, social and psychological legacies? What are the possible cultural implications of the representation of woman-to-woman bonds, social, political or sexual, in the struggle against the canonisation of but one form of difference and one hierarchical bonding: gender?

The final part poses the question: *Who is the Other?* in two chapters that return to the historical ground of modernist culture with which the book opened. Chapter 8 focuses on an exhibition in support of women's suffrage held in New York in 1915 where works by Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas confronted each other across Knoedler's Gallery. In that historical moment an artist who is now a feminist heroine hung opposite the canonical modernist most notorious and debated for his misogynist views on and representations of women.² Using class rather than gender alone to tease

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out the conditions of a historical reading of such contradictory projects, I seek a way to challenge my own partisanship as a feminist art historian working on Mary Cassatt. The final chapter focuses on a trio of women who figure at the beginning of modernism: Laure (no known surname), the model for the black woman in Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863–5); Jeanne Duval, the African-European companion of the poet Baudelaire apparently portrayed by Manet in 1862; and Berthe Morisot, the French European painter and recurrent model for Manet in the period 1868–72. In this weaving of three narratives I trace the real and imaginary African presence in the formation of white, masculine modernism. Laure, like some figures in Mary Cassatt's 1891 suite of colour prints I discuss in Chapter 8, worked as a maid. A liminal figure, the domestic servant has been noted in many feminist writings as a marker of social difference between women and as a mythic figure that breaks the hermetic enclosures of bourgeois familial and domestic ideology in which a classed and raced femininity was articulated and enforced.³ This final section looks at the social relations between women in their differences as represented in works by both men and women while taking on once again what I have elsewhere called 'gender and the colour of art history'.

There is, I discover in retrospect, an unconscious agenda. The book is in part about loss, mourning and restoration. I lived this acutely during the process of writing a text that almost foundered on the difficulty of hanging on the edge of the 'depressive anxiety' that Melanie Klein argued is the fate of all subjects, the condition of creative impulse, and the infantile space into which incomplete mourning can at any time precipitate us. Now, at a distance of three years from the moment of writing, I can see more clearly the way in which my own unprocessed grief as a motherless daughter presses upon and shapes my interests, my attention to facets of a painting, a debate, as well as my idealisations and mythologies. I ask indulgence of the reader for the ways in which a personal narrative informs and even might be said to intrude upon its apparently historical materials. At the same time, I draw encouragement from Shoshana Felman, when she writes of a covenant of reading in the exploration of women's missing autobiographies.⁴ In opposition to simplified feminist notions of 'getting personal', Shoshana Felman suggests that our own stories are missing, yet are to be found as we read those of other women. While, following Hayden White, we must acknowledge that there is a convergence between 'history writing' and writing fiction, for all texts are structured by their own rhetorical figures, the conscious awareness of 'narrative' when we write 'history' has special resonances for feminists in their desire not only to do history differently but to tell tales in such a way as to make a difference in the totality of the spaces we call knowledge. I have used this book to find my own autobiography as much as I have lent some of my own story to the texts I discovered in the archive. The trick is to hold the two in a creative covenant. Across that moment of both distance and yearning plays what I call 'desire'.

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NOTES

- 1 Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- 2 Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock, eds, *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision* (London: Pandora, 1992; now London: Rivers Oram).
- 3 Jane Gallop, 'Keys to Dora', in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction* (London: Macmillan, 1982).
- 4 Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).