OLD MISTRESSES

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Women, Art and Ideology

Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock

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In memory of Gay Fischer and Kathleen Pollock

Contents

Illustrations

A Lonely Preface (2013)

There are a lot of programmes now made for TV about art and artists. Presented with muscular energy by very masculine presenters, stories of heroic individuals like Gauguin or of groups like the Impressionists are vividly narrated in documentary or docu-fictional forms. Have you ever seen such a programme that celebrated equally women of the Renaissance, women in the Impressionist circle, women in American modernism? Perhaps you have caught a documentary on Frida Kahlo, Louise Bourgeois or Tracey Emin. But ask yourself, are they presented in the same way as their masculine peers? Is their art fully explored or is their private life, sexuality and perhaps tragedy or trauma the focus? Is Mary Cassatt or Berthe Morisot as familiar to you as Claude Monet or Auguste Renoir? Does the name Lee Krasner or Helen Frankenthaler come to mind in the same moment as Abstract Expressionism conjures up Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko? Should it?

Finalizing her film *Women in Art and Revolution* (2011), American artist Lynn Hershman interviewed visitors to the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York in 2007. She asked them to name some women artists. Almost none could name even one. It is forty years, almost half a century, since the opening salvo of a feminist initiative to challenge the erasure of women from the History of Art. Has it changed attitudes? Has it created an inclusive History of Art? This book first appeared in 1981 as part of that initiative. Yet it differed in ways that speak to the present, and still dismal situation. Most of the books published in the 1970s were necessarily compendia of forgotten names, recovering from revisited archives a substantial and consistent record of women as artists across all ages and cultures. *Old Mistresses* insisted, however, that merely trying to add back the missing names of women was doomed to failure. Instead, it proposed a critique of the structural sexism in the discipline of Art History itself. It also directly linked the investigation of past histories of art and dominant regimes of visual representation to the comprehension and

critical valuation of art made by women in the present. It daringly bridged the historical and the contemporary fields.

In her essay that initiated a feminist field of enquiry in Art History, first published in 1971, 'Why Are There No Great Women Artists?' Linda Nochlin marked out a theoretical ground for the fledgling feminist project as a paradigm shift (Gornick and Moran, 1971). Not merely recovering and revalidating missing heroines of the past – which was impossible according to Nochlin – feminism, she declared, would have to accept the negative impact of social discrimination on all women in the past. There simply had been no great women artists because institutions and social attitudes had limited women by denying them access to fundamental forms of art training and by shaping for them subservient, domesticated life-worlds. Moreover, the very concept of genius, of greatness, was itself gendered masculine. Having accepted these problems, feminism could then extend its critique of all forms of social exclusion, and challenge the discipline of Art History itself at its ideological core, contesting the ideal of the autonomous, self-determining artist as genius and the notion of the autonomy of art free from all social and historical determinations. Posing gender as probe, feminism could shift the entire paradigm of art historical thinking, opening hegemonically formalist Art History and its exclusive canons to all forms of social, institutional and cultural factors shaping difference (be that class, race, gender or sexuality) as the grounds for exclusion from access to art and recognition within the canon of art.

In one sense, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* remained faithful to Nochlin's radical call for what I would later define as 'feminist interventions in art's histories' that represented much more than a cosmetic corrective to the half-empty galleries and incomplete libraries because they challenged the foundations of Art History (Pollock, 1988). To elaborate the paradigm shift, Rozsika Parker and I drew, mostly unknowingly, on the many new trends in cultural theory that were emerging in the early 1970s. We firstly defined Art History as a discourse based on our new understanding, drawn from Michel Foucault, that groups of statements, patterns of thinking, practices of pedagogy and induction into modes of thought actively – performatively we would say nowadays – constituted their field and its objects. Not a given to be studied, art was what the art historical expert stated it was.

Thus Rozsika Parker and I used the variety of the English language to distinguish the history of art as the domain of study from Art History as the formalized discipline that studied that domain and in doing so, selectively shaped our understanding of what art had been and who the artist was. We argued that this shaping, the discursive formation of Art History, was not just passively forgetful. Art History structurally and actively excluded women

from being considered able to participate in the realm of art, and from being considered an artist. That was part of its project; thus gendering was its ideological effect.

Language is one field of this operation. Therefore, the terms 'art' and 'artist', seemingly neutral terms, in fact register, without having to advertise it openly, a privileging of masculinity as synonymous with creativity because in order to indicate that an artist is a woman, the neutral term artist must be qualified by an adjective. The effect is, in fact, to disqualify the woman artist immediately from being treated as an artist. Artist/woman artist, artist/black artist, artist/queer artist: any qualification has the effect of marking the second term, loading it with local particularities while leaving unspoken and unmarked the privileged and seemingly universal term, artist, as the space for masculinity, whiteness, heterosexuality.

Of course, the very term, 'Old Mistresses', first used by Elizabeth Broun and Ann Gabhart for an exhibition of women artists of the past in 1972 also exposed the ideological, that is to say interested, partial and exclusionary, underpinnings of language in general. There is no equivalent term of respect such as 'Old Master' to designate the artist-women who also made Renaissance, Baroque and subsequent art in the West. Mistress has very different, overtly sexual, connotations.

Art History, like feminism itself, is to be understood, therefore, as a 'technology of gender' as theorist Teresa de Lauretis would later express the active production of gender differentiation and a hierarchy of values and meanings by means of social practices and disciplinary discourses (de Lauretis, 1987). Our reading of the texts that formed the discourse of Art History as a selective endorsement of art by and for men exposed a 'political unconscious' that, moreover, could only sustain its idealized artist as masculine by concurrently invoking and gendering a negative cipher: femininity. Thus although on the whole women were never mentioned in the standard 'story of art' books, a few were regularly referenced specifically to represent all that was at once not art and not art because is was gendered feminine. This we named the feminine stereotype, which attributed essential qualities to all women, and used this negative essentialism to disqualify women from being considered artists. The stereotype worked by treating artists who were women as the followers or pupils of men-artists, or as artists who naturally tended to do slight things like portraits, still-life, flower painting, or were congenitally weak in style, lacking invention, favouring sensuous colour over intellectually rigorous form or line and so forth. Then the decorative arts were seen as a whole as feminized in similarly negatively valued terms: using patterns, derivative, repetitive, above all unoriginal.

Listening like an analyst to the recurring patterns of words and phrases used of anything that had to be dismissed or devalued, we noted that very conventional and negative notions of the feminine discursively and insistently established a gendered hierarchy. Thus it was not a matter of accusing individuals of prejudice. What we wanted to make clear was that anyone entering into Art History, or absorbing its protocols and language, would also be inducted into its gendering ideologies and gendered evaluation systems irrespective of the gender of the art historian. Whatever women did or do is separated out from the domain of art pure and simple; qualified by an adjective it is effectively expelled and becomes partial, local and lesser. So the effect of the analysis offered in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* is a radical challenge to the normative procedures, inherent assumptions, value system and ideological language that constitute the discipline of Art History in its academic, popularized or museum forms. Women cannot be simply added into this discourse because a place for them – but only as secondary and derivative – is already structural to its formation. Whenever a curator challenges her museum colleagues by asking why no women are being proposed for the collection or for an exhibition, that curator is always placed in the position of having to make the case as if being in fact a part of the History of Art by being there and having made art is not sufficient ground for being acknowledged as always-already part of what should be conserved, curated, exhibited, interpreted.

Using concepts such as ideology and discourse, Rozsika Parker and I also invited into the shifted paradigm of feminist interventions an understanding of representation, the image, and the gaze, terms which were concurrently altering the ways in which cinematic and popular cultural imagery was being analysed at the time. The idea of art as the expression of an individual artist whose intentions shaped the meaning of the artwork in relation to purely formal or aesthetic concerns and which was self-evident to anyone who looked at the picture or sculpture was, and still is in many people's minds, the dominant, the only approach to art. That was the discourse in which we were both trained as students of Art History in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Cinema studies created a new vocabulary, in which the image became a field semiotically organized to produce meanings and affects for the subject who occupied a specific viewing/receiving position created by the organization of the visual field: the position of the gaze. Feminist theorist Laura Mulvey (Mulvey, 1975/1988) drew on several strands of psychoanalytical theory to reveal the cinematic gaze as structurally masculinized by organizing pleasures and anxieties around seeing and what is offered to be seen – to a mastering gaze – along an axis of active/passive, subject/object, which was culturally equated with masculine/feminine positions, not with actual men and women.

To both Rozsika Parker and me, art seemed so much richer, more interesting, more relevant to lived lives, to experiences of suffering and joy, oppression and liberation, ambivalence, envy, shame and love than the narrowed art historical approaches allowed. Formalism appeared only to impoverish art. Thus turning to simultaneous feminist challenges to the sexism and gender ideologies in literature and cinema studies, our experimental feminist work in and on art's many potential histories also drew into the frame our own experience on the one hand, and the language of psychoanalysis as a theory of subjectivity, language and sexual difference in the field of vision on the other. What we ended up doing was, therefore, neither a history of why women had never been great women artists, nor a compensatory reclaiming of a heroic past. Instead we offered a series of readings of how artist-women had negotiated their historically varied conditions of making art, and how they inscribed their complex, ambivalent and potentially transformed situations in their various, historically specific acts of representation and often self-representation. We sought to reconnect artistic practice to social and historical forces shaping both art and gender, and to read the visual arts as inscriptions of situated subjectivities negotiating given or changing aesthetic practices and artistic languages.

One of the major experiences of my life was working with Rozsika Parker to create this book that began its life as a collective project of a group of women meeting in London in 1973 to explore art and gender. Our group came together at a meeting called to defend Swedish artist Monica Sjöö who had participated in an exhibition in Camden Public Library by exhibiting a large figurative painting, in a style inspired by Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera, showing a woman proudly giving birth. She had dared to title it *God Giving Birth* (1969). The painting was attacked as both pornographic and obscene for showing a birth and almost blasphemous for associating the deity with the procreative female body. Censored and condemned, the painting and the artist became a *cause célèbre* for artists, writers and art historians who were at that moment being awakened to a new kind of consciousness by the mass, worldwide Women's Movement.

This historic revolt of women had from the very start understood that images were part and parcel of the problem women were now confronting in the second wave of feminism, the first having focused on political and economic emancipation. Both in the United States in 1968–69 and in Britain in 1970 women declared war on ideological sexism in contemporary visual culture by protesting against Miss World beauty contests that epitomized current ideas of woman as merely a beautiful spectacle, of woman as a desirable body honing itself only for display and consumption. When in 1971 John Berger delivered on television *Ways of Seeing*, his astonishing critique of

art as civilization – recently propounded by Kenneth Clark in his TV series of that title – the nascent feminist critique of woman as image received powerful ammunition in his analysis of a gendered regime of seeing (masculine) and being shown to be seen (feminine) which traversed the boundaries of high art and contemporary soft pornography, exposing a shared logic of woman as a sexualized body offered to a consuming masculinized gaze. Thus when our group came together, we had some resources with which to think about a critique of 'images of women'.

But what about art? The Women's Movement initially understood the power of the image and used it in propaganda, posters, and even political performances – for instance Alison Fell created the 'Flashing Nipples' performance as part of the protest against Miss World in 1970. Women, dressed in black, stood in the dark holding bicycle lamps to their breasts and groin, flashing them on and off as a commentary on the sexist, sexualized mapping of the female body. But the significance of art *per se*, the symbolic meaning of the artist, creativity and aesthetic practices, these were not part of the radical agenda, seemingly too bourgeois, too *élite*, too removed from the real arenas of women's daily struggle with domestic labour and violence, lack of control over their own bodies, lack of equal pay and exclusion from most forms of decision making and power from Parliament through the trades' unions, from factories to executive suites. Artists and those of us who had chosen to be academically or professionally interested in art as critics or historians wondered if there was a place for us in the Women's Movement, and, on the other hand, if there was a space for burgeoning feminist analysis in the sphere of art. What would that look like?

It is important to stress that, by the early 1970s, there was a tabula rasa with regard to artists who were women. There were no books that included any information. Women artists were never discussed in Art History courses. A whole history had disappeared during the twentieth century. Contemporary women's work was hardly ever reviewed, reproduced, discussed or documented in the art press. The Tamarind Workshop in Los Angeles did a survey of major art magazines in 1970 and revealed that between 95 and 98 per cent of words and pictures in those journals were devoted to art made by men. So our little group had to search around for any materials and methods to help us find out about women in art.

The crucial element was the model of the emerging Women's Movement: consciousness-raising (exploring our own narratives, histories and experiences) and the foundational democratic impulse of the movement which empowered us to use our own experience, to break down barriers between areas of thought and to believe that there was a hidden history that we might reconstruct to provide us, in our new moment of feminist activity, with a pre-history that