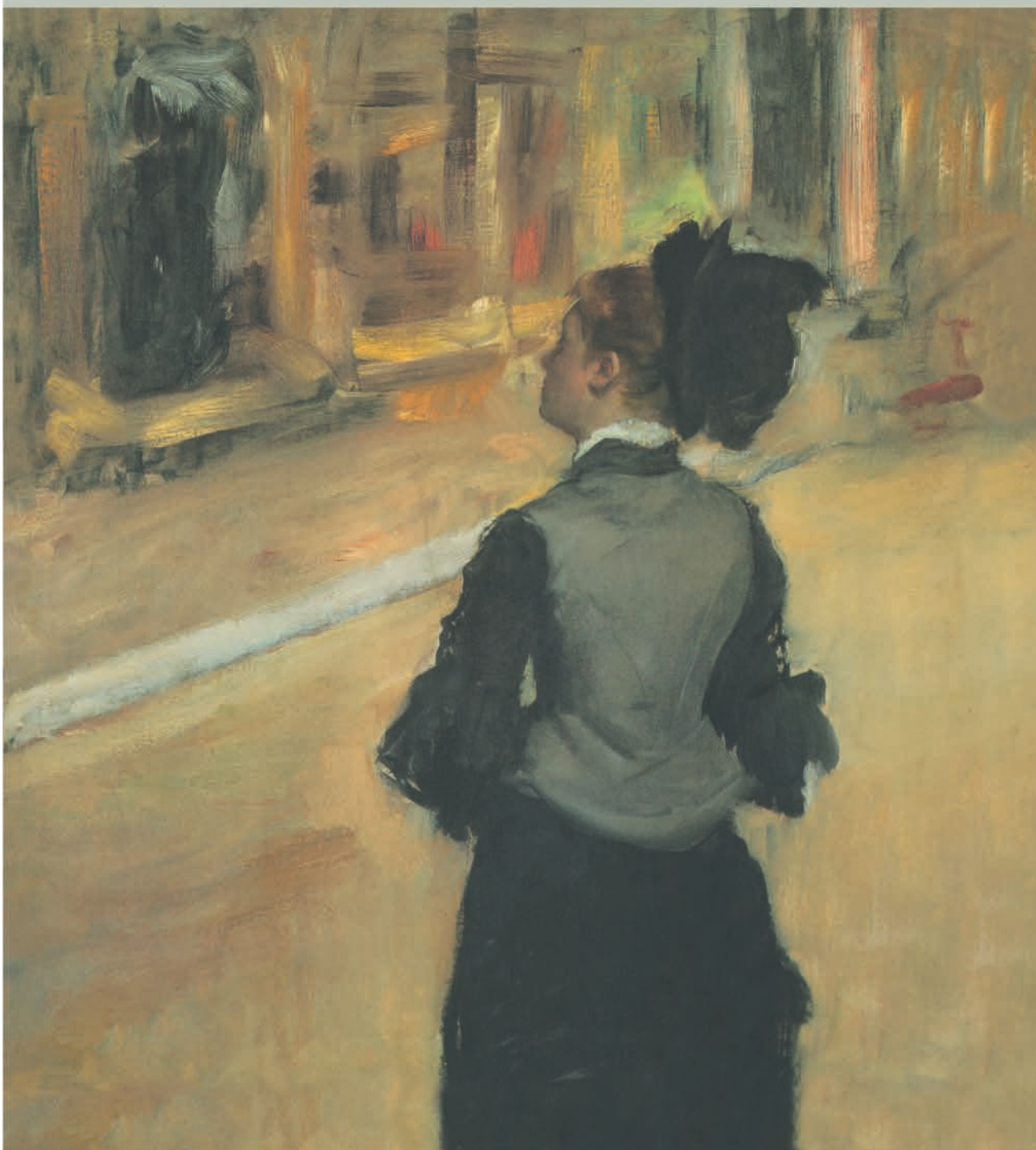
GRISELDA POLLOCK

DIFFERENCING THE CANON

Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories



DIFFERENCING THE CANON

In this major new book, renowned art historian Griselda Pollock makes a compelling intervention into a debate at the very centre of feminist art history: should the traditional canon of the 'Old Masters' be rejected, replaced or reformed? What 'difference' can feminist 'interventions in art's histories' make? Should we simply reject the all-male succession of 'great artists' in favour of an all-woman litany of artistic heroines? Or should we displace present gender demarcations and allow the ambiguities and complexities of desire to shape our readings of art?

Differencing the Canon moves between feminist re-readings of the canonical modern masters – Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec and Manet – and the 'canonical' artists of feminist art history, Artemisia Gentileschi and Mary Cassatt. Pollock avoids both an unnuanced critique of masculine canons and an unquestioning celebration of women artists. She draws on psychoanalysis and deconstruction to examine the project of reading for 'inscriptions in the feminine', and asks what the signs of difference might be in art made by an artist who is 'a woman'.

Pollock argues that in order for difference to be understood as more than the patriarchal binary of Man/Woman we must acknowledge the differences between women which are shaped by the racist and colonial hierarchies of modernity. Pollock returns to Gayatri Spivak's injunction that we must always ask 'Who is the Other woman?', and explores questions of sexuality and cultural difference in modernist representations of black women such as Laure in Manet's *Olympia*, and in the work of contemporary artist Lubaina Himid.

Griselda Pollock is Professor of Social and Critical Histories of Art, and Director of the Centre for Cultural Studies, at the University of Leeds.

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GRISELDA POLLOCK

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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

For SARAH KOFMAN

May her memory be a blessing

CONTENTS

PART IV
Who is the other?

ILLUSTRATIONS

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

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 phallocentric 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

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 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'.

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).

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Griselda Pollock
Leeds 1998

Part I

FIRING THE CANON

As canons within academic disciplines go, the art historical canon is among the most virulent, the most virilent, and ultimately the most vulnerable.
Nanette Salomon, *'The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission'*, 1991

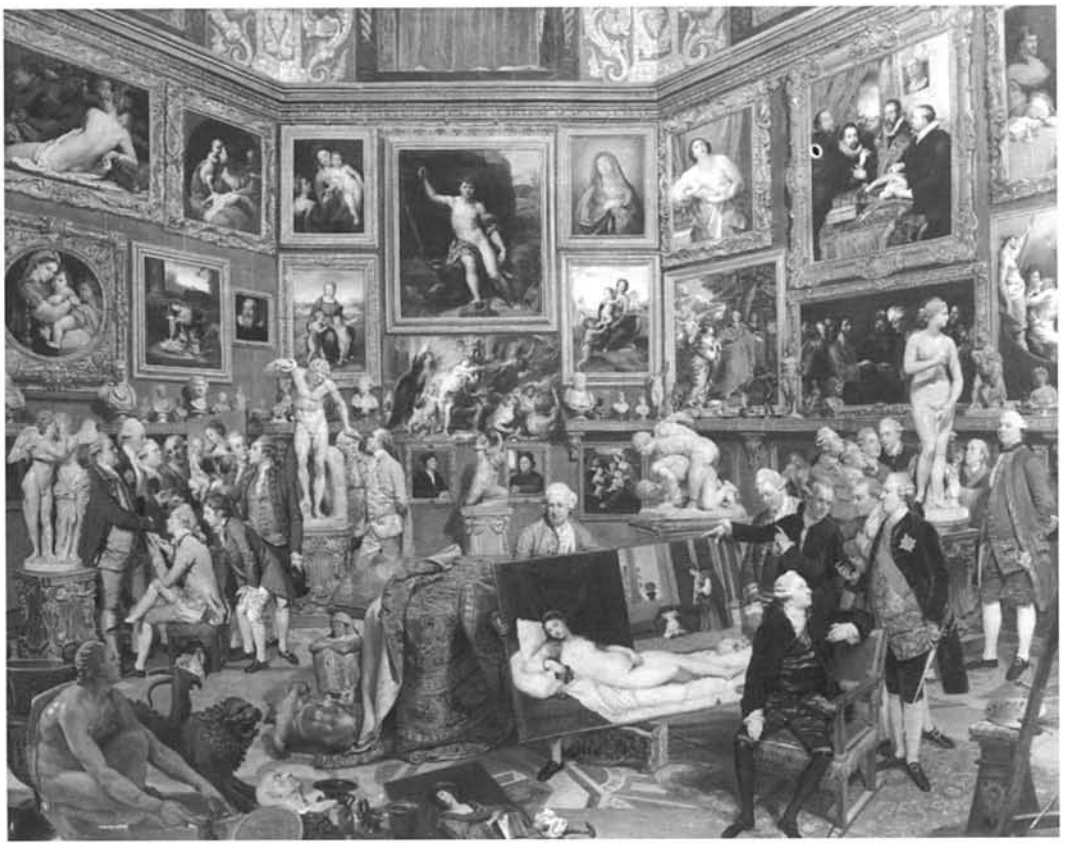

Fig. 1.1. Johan Zoffany (1733/4–1810), *The Tribuna of the Uffizi*, 1772–7/8, oil on canvas, 123.5 × 155 cm. London: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

1

ABOUT CANONS AND CULTURE WARS

The term *canon* is derived from the Greek *kanon*, which means 'rule' or 'standard', evoking both social regulation and military organisation. Originally, the canon had religious overtones, being the officially accepted list of writings that forms the 'Scriptures'. The first canonisation exercise was the selection of the Hebrew Scriptures, made by an emergent priestly class around the seventh century BCE, of which the historian Ellis Rivkin has argued that the choice was 'not primarily the work of scribes, scholars or editors who sought out neglected traditions about wilderness experience, but of a class struggling to gain power'.[1] Canons may be understood, therefore, as the retrospectively legitimating backbone of a cultural and political identity, a consolidated narrative of origin, conferring authority on the texts selected to naturalise this function. Canonicity refers to both the assumed quality of an included text and to the status a text acquires because it belongs within an authoritative collection. Religions confer sanctity upon their canonised texts, often implying, if not divine authorship, at least divine authority.

With the rise of academies and universities, canons have become secular, referring to bodies of literature or the pantheon of art (Fig. 1.1). The canon signifies what academic institutions establish as the best, the most representative, and the most significant texts – or objects – in literature, art history or music. Repositories of transhistorical aesthetic value, the canons of various cultural practices establish what is unquestionably great, as well as what must be studied as a model by those aspiring to the practice. The canon comprehensively constitutes the patrimony of any person wanting to be considered 'educated'. As Dominick LaCapra comments, the canon reaffirms a 'displaced religious sense of the sacred text as the beacon of common culture for an educated elite'.[2]

Historically, there has never been just one, single canon. Art historically, there are competing canons. During the great era of art historical activity in the nineteenth century, many artists as well as schools and traditions were rediscovered and revalued. Rembrandt, for instance, was reclaimed in the nineteenth century as a great religious and spiritual artist instead of being dismissed, as he had been in the eighteenth, as a sloppy painter of low subjects, while Hals, long avoided as a minor Flemish genre painter of no great skill or distinction, became an inspiration to Manet and his generation of modernists in search of new techniques of painting 'life'.[3]

Always associated with canonicity as a structure, however, is the idea of naturally revealed, universal value and individual achievement that serves to justify the highly select and privileged membership of the canon that denies any selectivity. As the record of autonomous genius, the canon appears to arise spontaneously. In 'What is a Masterpiece?' the art historian Kenneth Clark acknowledged the fluctuations of taste according to social and historical vagaries that allowed Rembrandt to be disdained in the eighteenth century or artists that we no longer value to have been highly rated in the nineteenth. None the less, Clark insists that 'Although many meanings cluster around the word masterpiece, it is above all the work of an artist of genius who has been absorbed by the spirit of the time in a way that has made his individual experiences universal'.[4]

The canon is not just the product of the academy. It is also created by artists or writers. Canons are formed from the ancestral figures evoked in an artist/writer/composer's work through a process that Harold Bloom, author of the major defence of canonicity, *The Western Canon* (1994), identified as 'the anxiety of influence', and I, in another mode of argument, the avant-garde gambit of 'reference, deference, and difference'.[5] The canon thus not only determines what we read, look at, listen to, see at the art gallery and study in school or university. It is formed retrospectively by what artists themselves select as their legitimating or enabling predecessors. If, however, artists – because they are women or non-European – are both left out of the records and ignored as part of the cultural heritage, the canon becomes an increasingly impoverished and impoverishing filter for the totality of cultural possibilities generation after generation. Today, the canons are settled into well-known patterns because of the role of institutions such as museums, publishing houses and university curricula. We know these canons – Renaissance, modernist, etc. through what gets hung in art galleries, played in concerts, published and taught as literature or art history in universities and schools, gets put on the curriculum as the standard and necessary topics for study at all levels in the educating – acculturating, assimilating – process.

In recent years the culture wars have broken out as new social movements target canons as pillars of the established elites and supports of hegemonic social groups, classes and 'races'.[6] Canonicity has been subjected to a withering critique for the selectivity it disavows, for its racial and sexual exclusivity and for the ideological values which are enshrined not just in the choice of favoured texts but in the methods of their interpretation – celebratory affirmations of a world where, according to Henry Louis Gates Jnr., 'men were men and men were white, when scholar-critics were white men and when women and people of colour were voiceless, faceless servants or laborers, pouring tea and filling brandy snifters in the boardrooms of old boys' clubs'.[7] Critique of the canon has been motivated by those who feel themselves voiceless and deprived of a recognised cultural history because the canon excludes the texts written, painted or composed and performed by their social, gender or cultural community. Without such recognition, these groups lack representations of themselves to contest the stereotyping, discriminating and oppressive ones which figure in that which has

been canonised. Henry Louis Gates Jnr. explains the political implications of enlarged canons that accommodate the voice of the Other:

> To reform core curriculums, to account for the comparable eloquence of the African, the Asian, and the Middle Eastern traditions, is to begin to prepare our students for their roles as citizens of world cultures through a truly human notion of the 'humanities' rather than – as Mr. Bennett [Secretary for Education under Ronald Reagan] and Mr. [Harold] Bloom would have it – as guardians of the last frontier outpost of white male western culture, the keepers of the master's pieces.[8]

The 'discourse of the Other' must of necessity 'difference the canon'. Yet it reveals a new difficulty. However strategically necessary the new privileging of the Other certainly is in a world so radically imbalanced in favour of the 'privileged male of the white race', there is still a binary opposition in place which cannot ever relieve the Other of being *other* to a dominant norm.

Different kinds of moves have been necessary even to imagine a way beyond that trap. Toni Morrison has argued that American literature, whose canon so forcefully excludes African American voices, should, none the less, be read as structurally conditioned by 'a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence'.[9] By identifying this structurally negative relationship to African culture and Africans within the American canon of white literature, notions of excluded others are transformed into questions about the formation of Eurocentric intellectual domination and the resultant impoverishment of what is read and studied. This argument can be compared with that Rozsika Parker and I first advanced in 1981 in opposition to an initial feminist attempt to put women into the canon of art history. We used the apparent exclusion of women as artists to reveal how, structurally, the discourse of phallocentric art history relied upon the category of a negated femininity in order to secure the supremacy of masculinity within the sphere of creativity.[10]

In the early 1990s, the issue of the total gender asymmetry in the canon, implicit in all feminist interrogations of art history, became an articulated platform through a panel organised by Linda Nochlin, *Firing the Canon*, in New York in 1990 and through the critical writing of Nanette Salomon on the canon from Vasari to Janson, cited at the head of Part 1.[11] Feminist critics of the canons of Western culture could easily critique the all-male club represented by Ernst Gombrich's *Story of Art* and the original editions of H. W. Janson's *History of Art* that featured not one women artist.[12] Feminists have shown how canons actively create a patrilineal genealogy of father–son succession and replicate patriarchal mythologies of exclusively masculine creativity.[13] Susan Hardy Aiken, for instance, traces the parallels between the competitive modelling of academic practices, the Oedipal stories narrated by canons, the rivalries that serve as the unconscious motor of intellectual or cultural development, all of which produce the coincidence of the 'noble lineage of male textuality, the parallel

formation of canons and the colonizing projects of western Europe organised rhetorically around the opposition civilisation and barbarism'. She concludes:

> These links between priestly authority, the implications of 'official' textuality, and the exclusionary and hegemonic motives within canon formation have obvious significance for the question of women and canonicity . . . Woman . . . becomes a profanation, a heretical voice from the wilderness that threatens the *patrius sermo*, – the orthodox, public, canonical Word – with the full force of another tongue – a mother tongue – the *lingua materna* that for those still within the confines of the old order must remain unspeakable.[14]

Is feminism to intervene to create a maternal genealogy to compete with the paternal lineage and to invoke the voice of the Mother to counter the text of the Father enshrined by existing canons? Susan Hardy Aiken warns: 'one might, by attacking, reify the power one opposes.'[15] Against the closed library, from which, in her famous feminist parable on the exclusivity of the canon, *A Room of One's Own* (1928), Virginia Woolf so eloquently showed women to be shut out, we might propose more than another bookroom. Instead we need a *polylogue*: 'the interplay of many voices, a kind of creative "barbarism" that would disrupt the monological, colonizing, centric drives of "civilisation" . . . Such a vision lives, as Adrienne Rich has taught us, in a re-vision: an eccentric re-reading, re-discovering what the canon's priestly mantle would conceal: the entanglements of all literature with the power dynamics of culture.'[16]

THEORETICAL MODELS FOR THE CRITIQUE OF THE CANON: IDEOLOGY AND MYTH

The critique of canons has been made on the basis of an inside/outside opposition. The canon is selective in its inclusions and is revealed as political in its patterns of exclusion. We might, therefore, approach the problem of the canon as critical outsiders with one of two projects in mind.

The first is to expand the Western canon so that it will include what it hitherto refused – women, for instance, and minority cultures (Fig. 1.2). The other is to abolish canons altogether and argue that all cultural artefacts have significance. The latter appears inherently more political in its totalising critique of canonicity. Strategically, however, I suggest we need a more complex analysis if we are not to end up in a position where insiders – representatives of Western masculine European canons – gird themselves to defend truth and beauty and its traditions against what Harold Bloom dismisses as the School of Resentment,[17] while former outsiders remain outsiders, 'the voices of the Other', by developing 'other' subdisciplinary formations – African American or Black Studies, Latino Studies, Women's Studies, Lesbian and Gay Studies, Cultural Studies and so forth. There can be no doubt how necessary and creative

Fig. 1.2. Faith Ringgold (b. 1930), *Dancing in the Louvre*, from *The French Collection*, 1991, acrylic on canvas with painted fabric. 183.7 × 200 cm. Private Collection

such commitment of scholarship, resources and acknowledgement is to areas hitherto ignored and understudied. But this cannot avoid the danger, so evident in fundamentally, and often overtly, racist and sexist class societies, that these initiatives may unwittingly reproduce the very segregation – ghettoisation – which excluded groups aim to challenge by demanding intellectual and educational equal rights for their own excluded minority.

Following Teresa de Lauretis, the opposition between inside and outside can be displaced. De Lauretis locates the critical project of feminism as a 'view from elsewhere' which is, however, never outside that which it is critically 're-viewing'.

> For that 'elsewhere' is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history; it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations. I think of it as the spaces in the margins of

> hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge-apparati.[18]

The movement is not from the spaces of existing representation to those beyond them, 'the space outside discourse', for there can be no such resource. Rather Teresa de Lauretis means 'a movement from the space represented by/in a representation, by/in a discourse, by/in a sex-gender system to the space not-represented yet implied (unseen) in them'.[19] This other scene, already there, which is as yet unrepresented, has, however, been rendered almost *unrepresentable* by the existing modes of hegemonic discourses. Working 'against the grain', reading 'between the lines', Teresa de Lauretis suggests that we have to take up the contradictions in which the represented and unrepresented concurrently exist.

Like Woman in phallocentric culture, feminism is already posited as the difference, that is, as something other to, and outside, art history, in contradiction to its inevitable logic. Thus feminist art history is an oxymoron. In this book I shall be exploring how to use this position of *apparent* alterity – the view from elsewhere/voice of the Other/Mother – to deconstruct the oppositions inside/outside, norm/difference which ultimately condense on to the binary pair man/woman for which the others become related metaphors. The question is how to *make a difference*, by analysing this structuring of difference, which already implicates me as a writer in ways that only writing itself will expose. My title uses the active verbal form, *Differencing the Canon*, rather than the noun 'Difference and/in the Canon' to stress the active re-reading and reworking of that which is visible and authorised in the spaces of representation in order to articulate that which, while repressed, is always present as its structuring other.

Furthermore, I suggest that we need to recognise another aspect of sexual differentiation, namely, *desire* in the formation of canons and the writing of counter-histories. The tenacity of the defenders of the present canon is explicable only in terms of a profound investment in the pleasures its stories and its heroes provide at more than social or even ideological levels. I shall argue for a psycho-symbolic dimension to the hold of the canon, its masculine ideals and not so much its intolerance of femininity as a masculinist boredom with and indifference to femininity's pleasures and resources as a possible and expanded way of relating to and representing the world.

Because of being structurally positioned as outsiders, feminists are susceptible to the desire to create heroines to replace or supplement those heroes our colleagues who are men find so affirming within the canonical structure. I am obliged to question both that desire and the very possibility of its realisation by looking again at the mythologies of the woman artist Western feminism has been fabricating. The introduction of this term, *mythology*, marks a shift of emphasis from the usual concerns of a social history of art, with its desire to reconfigure the conditions of artistic production in such as way as to get closer to the grain of historically sited social and cultural practices. In this book I am working from the side of reading and writing, reading the texts that different historical practices have left us and writing others that enter into a 'covenant

of reading' in a fully acknowledged search for the stories of women, my own included. The concept of myth seems for the moment as vivid and useful as the notion of ideology.[20] Bonding structuralist concepts of myth to Marxist theories of ideology, Roland Barthes identified the deep structures animating contemporary cultures that drew upon the character of myth itself to disown and to displace from view the ideologically fabricated meanings being produced. According to Barthes, myth is depoliticised speech, and its singular bourgeois form functions precisely to disown History, creating Nature – a mythic erasure of time and thus the possibility of political challenge and change.[21] In the writing of art's histories, the place of the artist, and of the woman artist, are overdetermined by mythic structures that naturalise a particular range of meanings for masculinity, femininity, sexual and cultural difference. Making a difference to the canon, itself a myth of creativity and gender privilege, cannot be achieved without a repoliticising scrutiny both of its deep structures – why are women Other to/within it? – and of its surface effects: the indifference to and exclusion of the work of artists who are women from the canon. Thus the question of desire – that enshrined in the canon as well as that which motivates a critique – runs parallel with analysis of the mythic structure which is encoded in the (sexual) difference the canon embodies.

Considering the canon as a mythic structure avoids the distracting arguments over who and what is or is not, should or should not be in which canon. Beyond the culture wars over its contents, which keeps us at the mythic level of a debate about quality, art, genius, significance and so forth, we need to pierce the naturalising carapace of myth to delineate the social and political investments in canonicity which make it so powerful an element in the hegemony of dominant social groups and interests and ask:

WHAT IS THE CANON – STRUCTURALLY?

More than a collection of valued objects/texts or a list of revered masters, I define the canon as a discursive formation which constitutes the objects/texts it selects as the products of artistic mastery and, thereby, contributes to the legitimation of white masculinity's exclusive identification with creativity and with Culture. To learn about Art, through the canonical discourse, is to know masculinity as power and meaning, and all three as identical with Truth and Beauty. So long as feminism also tries to be a discourse about art, truth and beauty, it can only confirm the structure of the canon, and by doing so corroborate masculine mastery and power, however many women's names it tries to add, or fuller historical accounts it manages to produce. There are famous women artists now: Mary Cassatt, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keefe. But a careful analysis of their status will find that they are not canonical – providing a benchmark for greatness. They are rather notorious, sensational, commodifiable or token, and will be as virulently attacked as they are lovingly adored. The stumbling block at all times for their acknowledgement within the canon lies in the unassimilable

question of sexual difference as a challenge to the very possibility of one 'rule' or 'standard' that is the canon.

Canonicity exists in many forms, the better to produce, at the cultural and ideological level, the single standard of the greatest and the best for all times. 'Tradition' is the canon's 'natural' face, and in this form cultural regulation participates in what Raymond Williams names social and political hegemony. In distinction to gross forms of coercive social or political domination, the Marxist term *hegemony* explains the way a particular social and political order culturally saturates a society so profoundly that its regime is lived by its populations simply as 'common sense'. Hierarchy becomes a natural order, and what appears to survive from the past because of its inherent significance determines the values of the present. Williams calls 'Tradition . . . in practice the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits'. It is always, however, 'more than an inert historicized segment; indeed it is the most powerful practical means of incorporation'.[22]

Tradition is, therefore, not merely what the past leaves us. It must always be understood as *selective* tradition: 'an intentionally shaping version of a past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification'.[23] Tradition cultivates its own inevitability by erasing the fact of its selectivity in regard to practices, meanings, gender, 'races' and classes. What is thus obscured is the active process of exclusion or neglect operated by the present-day makers of tradition. 'What has to be said about any tradition', argues Williams, 'is that it is . . . an aspect of *contemporary* social and cultural organisation, in the interest of the dominance of a specific class'.[24] Versions of the past ratify a present order, producing 'a predisposed continuity' which favours what Gayatri Spivak names as 'the privileged male of the white race'.[25]

Specific strategies characteristic, or even definitive, of the discipline of art history in the twentieth century can be read as not merely constituting a selective tradition privileging white masculine creativity to the exclusion of all women artists and men of minority cultures. The specific forms of art history's discursive formations tell more than a story of art. They also articulate historically changing configurations between classes, races, sexualities and genders secured by the production of sexual and other differentiations of power within our culture. Discrimination against women artists, for instance, can be understood institutionally. We can combat it through political activism, campaigning for more women artists at the Whitney Biennial and so forth, as we did in the early 1970s. But let us recall the response to the Whitney Biennial of 1993, where a broad and comprehensive representation of artists from all American communities evenly divided by gender, class and sexuality was met by an extreme, conservative negation of the event in the press. The exhibition was deemed to be unrepresentative of *the* American culture and *the* tradition these canonical critics sought to legitimate exclusively. The backlash reveals that the belief that we could correct the imbalances is mistaken. In order to shift the lines of demarcation we must attend both to the level of enunciation – what is said in discourses and done in practices in museums and galleries – and to the level of

effect, that is, how what is said articulates hierarchies, norms, asserting elite white masculine heterosexual domination and privilege as 'common sense' and insisting that anything else is an unaesthetic aberration: bad art, politics instead of art, partisanship instead of universal values, motivated expression instead of disinterested truth and beauty.

Since the potency of hegemony is not pure domination and absolute exclusion, it works by trying to draw us in so as to construct an effective *self-identification* with the hegemonic forms: a specific internalised 'socialization' which is 'expected to be positive but which, if that is not possible, will rest on a (resigned) recognition of the inevitable and the necessary'.[26] Cultural struggle at the moment is focused specifically on a contest around the canons of literature, music, art. These challenges to the existing selective versions of historical and contemporary creativity, which are passed off as the singular and valid for all times and places, and which we call Tradition, have arisen from those communities who most acutely experience the effects of exclusions. Desiring to be artists, or scholars or teachers, we are conflicted by the forced internalisation, in what the standard curricula of study decree, of our own communities' absence from, marginality in, or negation by the sphere of cultural production and meaning-making. Out of the range of the excluded jointly protesting the canon comes a counter-hegemony, with its counter-identifications – or at least the beginning of those alliances through which the domination of one social group can be contested by those others it denies and debases. At present the resistance is fragmented into special studies, each pursuing its own agenda in the name of a radical identity politics. Concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony point in the direction of strategies whose aim is to foster alliance across the splintered fragments of the contemporary world. These must involve understanding of how difference currently works to organise segregation and division and even makes us desire the continuance of its frontiers.

At the same time, it would be counter-productive to seek to abolish difference for such an ideal of universalism without particularity retains an imperialist notion of imagined sameness and unity. Differences can co-exist, cross-fertilise and challenge, be acknowledged, confronted, celebrated and not remain destructive of the other in an expanded but shared cultural space. Instead of the present exclusivity of the cultural canon contested by fragmented special studies all premised on the binary oppositions of identity politics, insiders/outsiders, margins/centres, high/low and so forth, the cultural field may be re-imagined as a space for multiple occupancy where differencing creates a productive covenant opposing the phallic logic that offers us only the prospect of safety in sameness or danger in difference, of assimilation to or exclusion from the canonised norm.

Given that we can define art history as a hegemonic discourse, we are forced then to ask: can feminists be 'art historians' – that is, professionals within its extended remit of curation, history and criticism? Or does that not of itself imply self-identification with the hegemonic tradition embodied in institutionalised art history, with the canonical as a systematic pattern of inclusions and exclusions which are generated

from and sustain deep structures of social and economic power? All hegemonic systems depend for their survival on some degree of pliability towards the forces or groups which contest and resist incorporation. These oppositions must either be included or disqualified. It is not yet clear whether feminism can be incorporated or whether it will itself develop forms that radically resist and provoke the hegemonic.

The notion of hegemony implies the constant negotiation of such inevitable conflicts through the induction of the subjects, both potential art historians and the art-loving public, into an identification with its selective version of the past. Certain activities or positions may be incorporated better to protect the underlying interests by concession and innovation. A bit of newness and controversy may actually keep the discipline alive and so will be permitted, but always at the margins. What speaks out loud, however – the underlying formations of power, laying art history as an academic exercise bare to a more critical reading of its effects and purposes – will be derided, positioned as aberrant. One strategy has been to say that, for instance, social histories of art or feminist studies are no longer *art history*. They are politics, sociology, ideology, methodology, or 'women's studies' or, the worst, *Theory*.

Now, feminists face a new paradox. If we retreat to the more hospitable domains of interdisciplinary women's or cultural studies, if we do not engage continually with art history as discourse and institution, our work will not disturb the canon and its discourses on art and artists. Yet we may need to keep a distance from the professionalised disciplinary modes of art history in order to develop our ability to raise the repressed question of gender within it. We cannot simply decamp. That would leave artists to the effects of art history's canonising discourses, which, in real terms, may seriously damage chances of being able to work and live as an artist if you belong to a non-canonical social group.

As a selective tradition thus defined, the canon, therefore, poses further specific and complex problems for feminism which overtake the narrow focus of this Marxist analysis signalled here by the necessary recognition of hegemony as a social and political force in culture. Let me quote Freud on Marx:

> The strength of Marxism clearly lies, not in its view of history or the prophecies of the future that are based on it, but in its sagacious indication of the decisive influence which the economic circumstances of men have upon their intellectual, ethical and artistic attitudes. A number of connections and implications were thus uncovered which had previously been totally overlooked. But it cannot be assumed that economic motives are the only ones that determine human beings in society . . . It is altogether incomprehensible how psychological factors can be overlooked where what is in question are the reactions of human beings in society.[27]

PSYCHO-SYMBOLIC INVESTMENT IN THE CANON, OR, BEING CHILDISH ABOUT ARTISTS

In her interpretation of Freud's aesthetics, Sarah Kofman provided us with a way of analysing what is invested in the canon at a level beyond the economic or ideological interests of dominant social groups. Canons are defended with an almost theological zeal that indicates more than the historical coincidence between the ecclesiastical use of the word *canon* for the revered and authenticated texts of the Bible and its function in cultural traditionalism. The canon is fundamentally a mode for the worship of the artist, which is in turn a form of masculine narcissism.

As a mere layman, Freud appeared to play down his own contribution to the understanding of art. For Kofman these disclaimers were, in fact, ironic.

> But at the end of the text, as in 'The Uncanny,' the 'connoisseurs' are reduced to glib talkers caught up in subjective opinions, elevating their own fantasies about works of art to the status of knowledge, yet unable to solve the riddle of the text in question. Freud's plea to them for lenient criticism should thus be interpreted ironically. What Freud means is that the art 'connoisseur' critcizes without knowing what he is talking about, for he is talking about himself; only the psychoanalyst can disclose the 'historical truth,' if not the 'material' truth of what he says.[28]

For Freud, therefore, the 'public's real interest in art lay not in art itself, but in the image it has of the artist as a "great man"', even though this fact is often repressed.[29] To unravel the riddle of a text is consequently to do violence to the idealised image of the artist as genius – to commit some kind of 'murder' – hence the resistance, not merely to psychoanalytic work on art in general but to any kind of demystifying analysis such as that carried out by social, critical and feminist historians of art. In writings on art – his contemporaries were some of the so-called founding fathers of the discipline and canons of art history – as well as in general public interest in art, Freud identified a combination of theological and narcissistic tendencies. Freud established parallels between the history of humankind revealed in anthropology and the psychological history of the individual mapped by the discipline he was inventing. Thus ancient rituals and forms of religion such as totemism and deism appeared to correspond to stages of infantile psychological development operating in each individual.[30] Freud discerned the way in which what we might imagine to be a highly sophisticated social practice – art appreciation – can be informed by psychic structures that are characteristic of certain powerful moments of *archaic* experience in the history of the human subject which, in a sublimated form, are culturally perpetuated in social institutions and cultural practices such as religion and art.

The excessive valorisation of the artist in modern Western art history as a 'great man' corresponds with the infantile stage of idealisation of the father. This phase is,

however, speedily undermined by another set of feelings – of rivalry and disappointment – which can give rise to a competing fantasy and the installation of another imaginary figure: the hero, who always rebels against, overthrows or even murders the overpowering father. Sarah Kofman explains:

> People's attitude towards artists repeats this ambivalence. The cult of the artist is ambiguous in that it consists of the worship of the father and the hero alike; the cult of the hero is always a form of self-worship, since the hero is the first ego ideal. This attitude is religious but also narcissistic in character and repeats that of the child toward the father and of the parents towards the child, to whom they attribute all the 'gifts' and good fortune that they bestowed upon themselves during the narcissistic period in infancy.[31]

This theme of the artist as incorporating both worship of the idealised father and narcissistic identification with the hero leads to another observation which should resonate for the reader thinking about canonical art history and its typical forms of monograph, biography and *catalogue raisonné*. If the artist functions as a heroic object of narcissistic fantasy, inheriting the adoration accorded to the father, this might explain the strong interest in biography, psychobiography and the way, in art history for instance, that so much of the work on art works functions to produce a life for the artist, a heroic journey through struggles and ordeals, a battle with professional fathers for the final winning of a place in what is always his – the father's – canon. It also takes us beyond the issues of sexism and discrimination, for the artist is thus a symbolic figure, through which public fantasies are given representational form. To an extent these fantasies, infantile and narcissistic, are not gendered exclusively masculine. But they do function to sustain a patriarchal legend.

Writing about an artist in a biographical mode is itself a doubly determined operation. On the one hand, it represents a desire to get closer to the hero, while, on the other, the work and the hero must remain sacralised, *taboo*, in order both to avoid the unconsciously desired murder of the father that the hero disguises and to keep up the theological illusion of art which similarly compensates for these conflicting desires. Thus Freud wrote in his study on Leonardo:

> Biographers are fixated on their heroes in a quite special way. In many cases they have chosen their hero as the subject of their studies because – for reasons of their personal emotional life – they have felt a special affection for him from the very first. Then they devote their energies to the task of idealisation, aimed at enrolling the great man among the class of their infantile models – at reviving in him, perhaps, the child's idea of his father. To gratify this wish they obliterate the individual features of their subject's physiognomy; they smooth over the traces of his life's struggles with internal and external resistances, and they tolerate in him no vestige of human weakness or imperfection. They thus

> present us with what is in fact a cold, strange, ideal figure, instead of a human being to whom we might feel ourselves distantly related.[32]

In her analysis of Freud's reading of biographers, for whom we could substitute art historians, Kofman noted the play of idealisation, identification and also the necessity to keep the artist as something apart, and special. Thus Freud carefully manoeuvres a space for the psychoanalyst to function as a mediator between the artist and the public. The biographer/connoisseur/art historian writes out of a constant ambivalence, a desire to bring the artist closer, and yet to maintain a distance, to manage admiration and rivalry in which the murderous desires unconsciously aimed at the father and displaced on to the admired hero are managed through the writer's mastery of the subject. The theological worship of the artist veils its underside, a narcissistic identification with an idealised hero. The application of psychoanalysis to art itself appears murderous because it tries to renounce these infantile investments in the figure of the artist/hero, to allow the artist to be examined and explained by psychic mechanisms to which we are all subject.

> On the one hand, the work of art is one of the offshoots of what is repressed in the artist, and as such is symbolic and symptomatic. It can be deciphered from traces, minute details which indicate that the repression is not entirely successful; this failure is the only thing which opens a space of legibility in the work.[33]

For Freud there is no mystery to art; but there is the challenge of deciphering its meanings which arises not because the artist is different, but as a result of the artist's 'normality' – being like the rest of us.

> The psychoanalyst acts as a mediator between the artist and the public, between father and son, because the son cannot bear to look his father in the face any more than he can confront his own unconscious . . . The contribution of psychoanalysis to biography is to have shown that the artist is no more a great man or a hero than we are. The 'application' of psychoanalysis completely reverses the stance of traditional biographies. 'Killing' the father means renouncing both the theological idealisation and the narcissistic identification which prompts the subject's desire to be his own father. Yet it also means respecting the superego, which alone makes possible the renunciation of the pleasure principle.[34]

Sarah Kofman positioned Freud, and indirectly psychoanalysis, as a 'new iconoclast', challenging the religious idealisation and narcissistic identification with the artist in order to pass beyond 'the childhood of art' into the realm of necessity where the idealising admiration for the artist is overcome by the 'adult' analysis of artistic works as texts to be deciphered. Demythifying analysis will, according to Freud, ultimately reveal not a mystical genius 'but a human being to whom we might feel ourselves

distantly related'. This insight is of particular importance to feminism as it battles with the canon. If we introduce into our readings in art history too much either about the personal life of the artist – traumas or specifically feminine experience for instance – or if we draw on our own life experiences to help understand what we are looking at, we might be dismissed for offering over-subjective readings that are insufficiently curbed by the necessary objectivity of rational historical distance. On the other hand, feminism can legitimately claim these Freudian insights to support the theorised attempt to balance historical scholarship with carefully presented insights developed from our lived histories about the significance of the psycho-symbolic in the making and reading of cultural texts.

Freud's proposed project, however, emerging at the same moment as art history itself came to disciplinary maturity, met, and still meets, with considerable resistance because:

> Psychoanalysis inflicted on man one of his three great narcissistic wounds by deconstructing the idea of the autonomous subject endowed with self-mastery and self-sufficiency, indeed a subject who was his own creator. Narcissism, however, is essentially a death force, so to denounce it is to work in favor of Eros.[35]

Sarah Kofman's reading of Freud thus sets up two registers. One enables us to have some insight into what is at stake in canonicity, as a formalisation of this religious-narcissistic structure of idealising the artist. The other is the highly gendered terms of such a structure. Fathers, heroes, Oedipal rivalries not only reflect the specifically masculine bias of Freud's attention. They suggest that, structurally, the myths of art and artist are shaped within sexual difference and play it out on the cultural stage. Linda Nochlin's founding question 'Why are there no "great *women* artists"' – with this addition 'in the canon?' – can be turned through this analysis to expose the canon's deeply *masculinist* structures of narcissism and idealism.[36]

The question then is: could we invert it, and insert a feminine version? Mothers, heroines, female Oedipal rivalry, female narcissism and so forth? Would we want to? Or would we try to side with Freud in the move into an adult rather than an infantile relation to art by wanting to disinvest from even a revised, feminised myth of the artist, and address ourselves to the analysis of the riddle of the texts unencumbered by such narcissistic idealisation? Surely we would rather be on the side of Eros than of Thanatos, of love and desire in our writing, than of death that, in the form of avoided 'murder' of the father/mother through idealisation of the hero/heroine, constantly presses on art history.

Using Sarah Kofman's analysis of Freud's aesthetics, we can then turn the analytical spotlight on feminist desire, and women's investment in art and artists who are women (Fig. 1.3). I pose the question: What makes us interested in artists who are women? It appears to be a simple question with an obvious answer. But it was only feminism – not the fact of being a woman – that permitted and generated such a desire, and created, in its politics, theories and cultural forms, a representational support which

Fig. 1.3. Richard Samuel (fl. 1768–87), *Nine Living Muses*, 1779, oil on canvas, 130 × 152.5 cm. London: Royal Academy of Art. (Left to right, seated: Angelica Kauffmann, Catherine Macaulay, Elizabeth Montagu; standing: Elizabeth Carter, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Elizabeth Linley-Sheridan, Hannah More, Charlotte Lennox)

could release into discourse aspects of feminine (which is, nevertheless deeply, ambivalent) desire for the mother and thus for knowledge about women.[37] In the light of the above, however, any desire, feminist or otherwise, now seems more complex. Why, as a feminist, am I interested in artists who, because of the rigorous sexism of art history, offer no reward as culturally idealised, canonised figures? Can the neglected women artists of the past function for me as a narcissistic ideal? Do I want to set them up as semi-divine heroines? What are we doing if we try to make them perform as such – if indeed, within the current regimes of sexual difference, we can? What if I desire something else from these stories of women? That is to say, is it possible to do the work I want to do on women artists within a disciplinary formation underpinned by an unacknowledged mythic and psychic structure that actively obstructs the historical discovery of difference, that renders uninteresting remembered stories of women? The answer is probably not. Would a writing of art's histories through *feminist* desire make a difference of another kind: anti-mythical, non-heroic, yet able to analyse works of art for the traces of subjectivities that are not like me because of a common womanhood, but can speak to me 'in the (historically variable) feminine'?

I have long suggested that 'art history', in so far as it embodies and perpetuates this dual narcissistic and religious attitude toward the artist as its disciplinary core, cannot survive the impact of feminism – a practice that, of necessity, must deconstruct this core if it is to be able to speak of the artistic practices of women. But here I want to propose that we apply theoretical insights acquired from Freud's work on 'the connoisseurs' to feminist practice. There is a space precisely here for feminist intervention. Even though Freudian psychoanalysis ultimately privileges the place of the Father, seeing all cultural stories as modelled on masculine Oedipal anxieties, and, as here, making the Father/Hero central to his analysis of art history, it theoretically offers a way to expose the desires and fantasies which have so far made it inconceivable to imagine women in the canon. Women, as representatives of the Mother, are not Heroes. The story of the feminine relation to the Mother takes a wholly different course. That is why I shall begin the book reading the work of canonical artists for traces of the maternal.

Women art historians are susceptible to identification, idealisation and narcissistic fantasy since many of the psychic processes Freud analysed are common to both masculine and feminine subjects in pre-Oedipal formation, and, more importantly, because, in the absence of any other legends, myths and images, women construct hybridised subjectivities with the bricolage of what phallocentric culture offers. Phallocentric culture, however, is premised on substitutions and repressions – particularly of the Mother. If one of the key projects of psychoanalysis is to read for the traces of incomplete repression, one way forward is, therefore, to read against the paternal grain *for the Maternal.* We can read for the Mother across the board, in the work of artists who are men and women, though there we will discover specificities and differences which are not the one difference that phallic logic decrees. This provides a territory in which we can both deconstruct the 'great man' myth and then productively read the works of men artists beyond its limited, repetitious refrains,