Women Making Art

History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics

Marsha Meskimmon

Routledge
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Women Making Art engages with complementary feminist thinking on history, subjectivity and aesthetics to rework those conventions which have occluded women's cultural agency and defined art made by women as a derivative version of a masculine norm. Rather than providing an inclusive survey of women artists, Marsha Meskimmon examines women's art practice across five continents and in a wide range of media at a number of key moments in the twentieth century to give an understanding of the intersections of history and culture, art practice, and theoretical issues.

Examining the ways in which women artists have reclaimed, expressed and defined personal and political histories, challenged conventional western notions of dichotomous sexed subjectivity, and opened out the relationships of pleasure/knowledge, word/flesh and space/time to new ways of thinking against the grain, Meskimmon discusses the work of artists such as Deborah Lefkowitz, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornelia Parker, Faith Ringgold, Mona Hatoum and Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, as well as other, less well-known artists from around the world. Focusing on historical, theoretical and aesthetic moments in the twentieth century such as the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the African diaspora, Queer Theory and cyberculture, Meskimmon illustrates the importance of women artists in rethinking dominant traditions and assumptions at times of cultural, political and technological change.

Marsha Meskimmon is Reader in Art History and Theory at Loughborough University. She is the author of *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (1996), *Engendering the City: Women Artists and Urban Space* (1997), and *We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (1999).

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For Mark T. Shutes (1947–2001) – my beloved brother, my inspiring teacher and my trusted friend.

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Introduction: Women Making Art

Exhilaration and danger

Over the past thirty years, a substantial body of literature on the topic of women artists and their work has demonstrated clearly that women have played a significant role in the production of visual art for centuries. The present volume inherits from that empowering scholarly tradition its absolute confidence in the ability of women to make art which can change the way we think about the world.

For myself, and many other feminist scholars like me, researching women's unique cultural and intellectual contributions to both the past and the present is an exhilarating exercise and an important revision of those histories from which women's activities have been excluded. Linda Nochlin's recent account of her early feminist research, teaching and curatorial work, describes precisely her sense of excitement as the significance of long-forgotten women and their art began to unfold in scholarly articles, highly-charged classroom experiences and exhibitions:

> . . . it was no mere passive conjunction of events that united me to the history of that year [1969] and those that followed, but rather an active engagement and participation, a sense that I, along with many other politicized, and yes, liberated, women, was actually intervening in the historical process and changing history itself: the history of art, of culture, of institutions and of consciousness.[1]

When second-wave feminists sought out the women who came before them, they uncovered a substantial body of evidence confirming women's important political, artistic and historical presence in the cultural life of the past and this material changed the way in which they understood history and their place within it. However, this groundbreaking work has not yet fully changed the iniquitous dynamics of sexual discrimination in the present, in the art world or elsewhere. It is still perfectly possible, for example, for a major exhibition of a century's painting to be mounted by three national galleries without including a single work by a woman.[2] It is even possible, when asked about this omission, to hear that it had gone unnoticed by the curators and be referred to the work of a particularly 'feminine' male painter who made the inclusion of work by women unnecessary.[3]

In contemporary art, it is still a surprise, or possibly a 'fix', if the nominees for a major art prize are all women, but not even noted when they are all men.[4]

It is obvious that much work remains to be done before the art made by women is given the attention it deserves. Yet writing about women's art practices, historical or contemporary, is not a simple task; indeed, it is a dangerous one. In the first place, crude models of affirmative action – counting the number of works by men and women in a show, for instance – are both insensitive to the complexity of sexual difference as it informs visual culture and, frankly, rather ineffective in changing power dynamics in the art world. Moreover, the 'addition' of women to the current canon of 'masters', the simplistic production of an alternative canon (the 'great' women artists) and/or other forms of celebratory separatism, provide no critique of the prevailing norms by which women have been occluded from the histories of art and no tactics by which those histories might themselves be changed.

The problem is not one of recognising that histories need to be redressed, but of understanding how this can be done without recourse to reductive definitions of 'women artists' and 'women's art' as homogeneous categories of alterity. In other words, it is imperative that the significant and complex differences between women, and not just between women and men, are acknowledged and made to signify in any reconceived histories of visual culture, and that the vexing question 'what difference does it make that this art was produced by women?' be addressed in all its subtle and meaningful variations.

Nowhere have the dangers of reductive categorisation been better stated than by Griselda Pollock when she wrote:

> If we use the term *women* of artists, we differentiate the history of art by proposing artists and 'women artists'. We invite ourselves to assume a difference, which all too easily makes us presume that we know what it is. Furthermore, art becomes its deposit and expressive vehicle . . .[5]

Heeding the advice not to assume a difference (and then presume we know what it is) does not imply that difference is irrelevant or unable to be articulated. Indeed, the intellectual challenge presented by women's art practice is to mobilise radical difference and think otherwise; every intervention into this subject is strategic, exhilarating and dangerous, changing both what and how we know. As a critical form of epistemological enquiry, exploring women making art is invaluable. Since we cannot just add women's art unproblematically to the category of 'things known', we are obliged to reconceive the very processes of knowing in acts of experimental and creative thinking.

In considering the potential impact of Gilles Deleuze's thought on cultural studies, Ian Buchanan identified similar problems with the presumed known: '[c]ultural studies displays a common assumption that its object is ready-made and that theory is something one simply applies'.[6] By contrast, for Buchanan, a 'Deleuzian cultural studies', would 'begin with the question of the subject, but it would not ask, what is a subject? Rather, as we have just seen, it would ask, how

does one become a subject?'[7] What Buchanan so aptly argues is that a shift from object to process, from an ontology of being to one of becoming, is the crucial component of thinking beyond an economy of the same, of the already-known. If we ask 'what *is* a woman artist' or 'what *is* women's art', we fall back into the logic of objectification and marginality, but if we take the lead and enquire into how women's art comes to articulate sexual difference in its material specificity and at its particular historical locus, the potential to generate new answers, ideas and concepts is endless. In the present volume, I am embarking upon this dangerous and exhilarating path, engaging in an active dialogue with women making art.

The title of this book is precise and implies process; this is not a text about a category of objects defined as 'women's art', it is about the contingency of 'women' and 'art', coming together to make and re-make meaning in particular social situations and aesthetic encounters. To define women artists as an homogeneous cohort, irrespective of the dynamics of their histories, or to seek in women's art some monolithic 'female essence', preceding specific practices as their knowable 'origin point', erases differences between women and reinstates that exclusionary paradigm which rendered female subjectivity invisible, illegible and impossible to articulate. Moving beyond that logic to engage with women's art and radical difference interrogates traditional modes of historical enquiry, the nature of the artist, concepts of authorship, intentionality and the very definition of 'art'.

Indeed, the present volume is focused upon works of art, attending closely to their potential to signify differently and materialise female subjectivity otherwise. This does not presume that art made by women is a vehicle for some kind of eternal 'woman-ness', nor that there is any obvious, literal or uniform relationship between the sex of the maker and the work produced. Rather, I agree with Elizabeth Grosz's point in 'Sexual Signatures: Feminism After the Death of the Author', that:

> The sex of the author has . . . no direct bearing on the political position of the text, just as other facts about the author's private or professional life do not explain the text. Nevertheless, there are ways in which the sexuality and corporeality of the subject leave their traces or marks on the texts produced, just as we in turn must recognize that the processes of textual production also leave their trace or residue on the body of the writer (and readers).[8]

In this essay, Grosz argued that 'discursive positioning', or the 'complex relation between the corporeality of the author, . . . the text's materiality and its effects in marking the bodies of the author and readers',[9] provides the key to examining the practices by which sexual difference might be articulated in and through an individual text. The significance of such thinking resides in its double play between materiality and agency. The specific corporeality of subjects and works ('texts') in conjunction with their historical location and material presence in the world, are neither dismissed as irrelevant nor reified as the essential origin of their meaning. Corporeal specificity is, instead, implicated in relations, processes and practices

through which matter comes to *matter*, or becomes meaningful. The interrelationship between an artist and a work, therefore, is both materially situated and in process, an effect of actions in the world.

Critics, theorists and historians also participate in this double play of materiality and agency; theory is not transparently applied to mute objects by disembodied, knowing subjects, but emerges from the positioning activities of knowledge projects. Following Buchanan, the questions we ask of women making art participate in the meanings which are produced – we are implicated in the productive relation. This is not a bad thing. Indeed, throughout this volume, I argue that engaging with women's art differently changes both what and how we know about histories, subjectivities and aesthetics, and that close attention to the double play of materiality and agency in women's art enables us to ask new questions of vital importance to the future. This locates me as a partner in dialogue with women making art rather than in the position of a privileged interpreter, explicating the inherent truths of women, art and cultural history. In an important sense, my task here is not to reveal the essence of female subjectivity expressed in art (even if this were possible), but to explore the *work* of women's art, the work it can do in articulating histories, subjects and sensory knowledges against the grain.

The *work* of art

It is important to begin an examination of the *work* of art with an instance. An exceptionally useful one is Cornelia Parker's 1996 piece, *The Negatives of Words (silver residue accumulated from engraving words)*, one of a number of Parker's works which focus on the traces left from processes of meaning production. In *The Negatives of Words*, tiny coils of metal, left from engraving, are carefully piled to form a delicate mound. Their treatment and display render them aesthetically provocative and visually absorbing. But this piece is compelling for a number of other reasons as well, including its resolute return of excised traces and residues to the focus of our attention, its emphasis upon the processes through which physical objects are brought forth and its strategic deployment of the 'in-between' of text, image and object. *The Negatives of Words* does not simply illustrate the concepts discussed earlier, it instantiates them, enabling us to grasp the work done by art at the interstices of materiality, subjectivity and agency.

If *The Negatives of Words* does not illustrate concepts, then what does it do? Mieke Bal's formulation of art as a mode of 'cultural philosophy' in which works act as 'theoretical objects', is instructive for thinking about practices such as Parker's.[10] That is, these works crystallise theory, they 'theorise', by forging a critical link between thinking and making, between the materiality of objects and the agency of artists and participant-observers. This locates the 'art' of these pieces in the 'work' that is done with them and again, requires us to ask different questions in our encounter. For example, asking what the 'negatives of words' *are* defeats the complex configuration of image, text, matter and idea in Parker's piece and simply reinstates the object: the negatives of words are the silver residue

Figure 0.1 Cornelia Parker, *The Negatives of Words (silver residue from engraving words)*, 1996, copyright, Cornelia Parker; photograph, Frith Street Gallery, London

accumulated in the act of engraving. I am arguing that here, the work of art does not reside in the visual image, physical artifact, suggestive title or descriptive parenthetical line, but emerges in their relational play, a play engendered by an embodied, corporeal subject.

For instance, one of the meanings which *The Negatives of Words* develops through this interplay concerns the effaced 'body' of 'text'. The body, deftly avoided in text-based knowledge regimes, commonly forms the base from which word differentiates itself to assume both transcendence and power over flesh, image and object.[11] Not coincidentally, the base matter from which words are engraved in the printing process is called the matrix. The links between matter, matrix and woman are definitive; by locating them as the negatives of words, the corporeal residue avoided as we ascend to text, Parker's work could hardly confront the gendered word/flesh dichotomy more explicitly. We can, of course, argue these ideas textually, but the modulation between the written word and the material object in *The Negatives of Words* engenders this meaning in a fully sensory, embodied connection with the work of art.

This, I am arguing, is one of the things art can do in terms of thinking; the *work* of art is the work of embodiment, of bringing us to our senses in cognition.

Clearly, the reconnection of bodies with knowledges is crucial to any project concerned with sexual difference and, for work focusing specifically upon women making art, it is imperative. This is not only because art and aesthetics have themselves been denigrated in favour of ostensibly disembodied knowledges (knowledges associated with pure rationality, freed from the deceit of the senses, corporeality and by extension, 'woman'), but because embodied thought is situated, perspectival, diverse and mobile. These wider ramifications reconceive the more deadly elements of universalising 'master' narratives within which female subjectivity is unable to be articulated and women making art are merely the negative shadow of their male counterparts.

An assimilative logic of the same supports the myth of transcendent, gender-neutral subjects, universal, homogeneous truths and *a priori* first principles in epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. Within such logic, difference is effaced, subjects not conforming to the normative centre are marginalised and knowledges become decorporealised as 'truths' beyond their material manifestation and effects in the world. Without labouring this point, there is no place within such a framework for women making art; their specific contributions to culture just cannot be seen in such a diminished ray of light.

Acknowledging the work of art as 'theory', as a fully sensory mode of cognition, reinstates the power of particular, located, corporeal meanings to emerge in encounters with difference. In a dialogue with women making art, this move is extraordinarily productive, enabling us to ask how female subjectivity was and is articulated in visual and material form, what meanings might have been signalled by the making of art by women in diverse historical circumstances and what such works might permit us to think and know now. These questions do not presume to define in advance what women's art can or might mean, they do not suggest that there is one, all-encompassing theory by which all women's art can or should be interpreted and they do not entail choosing, once and for all, whether to address women's art only, or to look at the art of women and men together. Such predetermined theories, methods and definitions are counterproductive in the case of women making art and can only curtail the potential it has to form new epistemes.

The challenge, rather, is to write *with* women making art and to create specific configurations of ideas, objects, images and texts, which address the questions we ask. And, while these do not set limits on what else might be asked of the work, they can be examined for their efficacy, rigour and persuasive explanatory power. In this volume, I am asking what new knowledges women making art can produce in terms of history, subjectivity and aesthetics. For that reason, I am focusing only on women's art practices and yet, in some instances, I am bringing together work from very different geopolitical and chronological contexts in order to think through particular issues and ideas. Without preempting the introductory comments at the start of each Part of this text, it is worth considering here how the geographical and chronological choices made in the case studies connect with the intertwined themes of history, subjectivity and aesthetics as they are used throughout this book.

New epistemes

In considering what difference it makes when art is produced by a woman, it is impossible not to confront the problems of conventionally defined histories, limited concepts of the subject as an autonomous 'I' and understandings of art which reinforce canonical exclusions and evaluate women's work negatively. Indeed, such conceptual frameworks are interdependent. Moreover, as feminist philosophers and theorists have demonstrated, the 'postmodern' and poststructuralist critiques of these meta-narratives have not always provided better or more useful models of female subjectivity, nor paradigms of histories or aesthetics which can account for sexual difference. In instances where poststructuralist theory itself ascends to the summit of presumed sex-gender-'race' neutrality and takes on the mantle of universal, abstract meta-discourse, it only serves to reinforce the very system it initially critiqued.

There are two intimately interconnected points established here: first, that the conventions of history, subjectivity and aesthetics which marginalised women's art practices supported a very particular geopolitical situation, one which is now disintegrating, and second, countering this conventional logic neither replaces it with a new meta-theory, nor refutes meaning altogether in some form of radical relativism, 'after' the subject. The rise of the modern, bourgeois, Euro-centric individual and the progressive, linear historical models which complemented his autonomy and power in the world, was the corollary of European colonial expansion and imperial domination as well as the so-called scientific and industrial revolutions. The geopolitical dominance of the 'west' over its 'others', the rise of the modern nation-state and the systematic assimilation or destruction of difference are related phenomena. Women's art did not just happen to be rendered marginal; associated with the feminine, the decorative and the facility (but not genius) of women, it became the negative 'other' of men's art, which could then transcend its corporeal trace to become simply 'art'.

Disentangling these complex strands to investigate the cultural legacy of western imperialism and its effacement of difference is difficult but possible. However, it is not all that needs to be done. We might be able to see how the work of women artists came to be less valued and less well known than that of many of their male contemporaries generally, but this general point does not address the astounding range of art which women made nor the extraordinary variations in their modes of practice and sophisticated negotiations with social norms and constraints. To explore these things is to engage productively with difference and to attend closely to the historically located and materially specific contingencies of women making art. This neither replaces the exclusionary logic of the same with a new, meta-theory of women's art (e.g. 'all women's art is . . .'), nor does it accede to the utter rejection of the subject and meaning, simply because these cannot be universalised as one.

This latter point is more pressing for feminist theorists concerned with female subjectivity and women's agency, since the critique of both the autonomous 'I' and the truth claims of, for example, history, philosophy and science, have led

some scholars to reject the subject of knowledge altogether. As many feminist and anti-colonial thinkers have rightly claimed, this rejection of the subject comes just as women and non-white, non-western subjects have claimed their voice. Dispersing subjectivity is easy when you have long since held the position of empowered subject; female subjectivity and women's agency (and, of course, the agency and subject-position of all those who had been denied as 'others') are not relics of a now-discredited social system, but important emergent conceptual structures. In my engagement with women making art, I am committed to both of these productive concepts, formulated not as the antiquated 'I' of the same, but as intersubjective modes of articulating difference.

In the chapters which follow, a series of close case studies are used to open debate on the three, intertwined themes. These cases are diverse – the artists and works range geographically from North, Central and South America, Europe (including the former Soviet Union), Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Australia and, chronologically, from the seventeenth century to the present. This geographical and chronological span is not, nor is it intended to be, an all-inclusive survey and there are many more regions and historical moments which might have been discussed at length. Moreover, it would be wrong to say that the cases are representative of the full range of women's artistic practices internationally; I was not attempting to give a cursory account of, for example, cultures in which the category of 'art' is utterly divergent to our own, albeit contested, understandings. In what follows, there is a focus upon diverse, international instances of practice by women which resist, reformulate and reconceive the central, western-normative paradigms described above. These instances, therefore, are actively engaged with or informed by the embeddedness of Euro-centric discourses (dramatically extended in the twentieth century by US power politics) in the international sphere, but they do not simply accede to this dominance. Their articulation of radical difference acts both as an anti-colonial force and as a means by which the 'international' might be redefined and positioned otherwise.

Additionally, the emphasis given to the articulation of female subjectivity in all its complex and sophisticated difference, refutes any essential or authentic claims concerning woman. The works considered throughout this volume were produced by women – diverse, heterogeneous and mobile subjects, constrained but never fully contained by their historical and material circumstances. Privileging the specificity of sexed subjectivity as it emerges in and through the visual arts, the works discussed deploy varied media and were made to be seen in a wide range of contexts. Some of the works are public monuments, some private self-images, designed to be circulated amongst friends; some of the artists are well known, others less so and there is a definitive mix of contemporary with past practice. This diversity demonstrates not only that women making art have been experimental and innovative for centuries, but that their interventions bear the valences of their material form and particular, practical development. There is no one type of women's art, yet women's art resides at the nexus of materiality, subjectivity and agency and bears the traces and residues of its discursive positioning. It provides us with an exceptionally apt means by which to create cross-cultural dialogues in

and through difference and to exacerbate the crisis points in conventional metanarrative, so to deconstruct their rigid economy of the same.

Not surprisingly, in exploring the varied work within this volume, overlapping themes emerged, such as the significance of cartography and mapping practices in formulating new concepts of the knowing subject, the role of pleasure in thinking through difference, a shift from object to process and from representation to articulation, the intertwining of text with image and of the individual in and with the collective and, of course, the power of corporeality and the senses to engender new epistemes. While these appear with regularity in this work, and are abiding concerns of mine, I do not imagine that they are eternal truths of women's art or that they will necessarily remain key features of women's art practices in the future. Moreover, there is no sense in which these broad conceptual constellations produce any particular form of artwork or theoretical structure, rather, they are formed by the negotiation of the kinds of parameters set in place by the 'modernity' of the past three centuries.

In the future, these parameters may alter and, consequently, the insights of this book will become a description of the past. I hope, however, that its determination to ask new questions and to acknowledge the vital significance of women making art, past, present and future, will be its legacy. At a moment when the institutional structures surrounding contemporary art seem bent on consuming the valuable work of feminism around, for example, the body, materiality, performativity and the sexualisation of space and time, without so much as noting their indebtedness to the intellectual, political and artistic interventions of generations of women, ensuring this legacy is all the more urgent.