

ETC



What's Neo about Neo-Feminism?

Marc James Léger

Number 84, December 2008, January–February 2009

Néoféminismes : l'intime / Neofeminisms: Intimacy

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/34771ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Léger, M. J. (2008). What's Neo about Neo-Feminism? *ETC*, (84), 20–22.

What's Neo about Neo-Feminism?



Neofeminisms

The theme of neo-feminism that the editors of *Etc* have proposed for an issue on contemporary feminist practices compels me to wonder what might the prefix 'neo' signal as a return to strategies that were elaborated in the 60s and 70s, that is, before 'third-wave' or 'post-structural' feminism. The question of a return, here as elsewhere, causes me to consider the current political context not only for feminism but for any critical cultural politics, and, moreover, for any critical articulation of culture in the context of the neoliberal engineering of culture industries. In this regard, I would ask what contribution neo-feminism might make to the most ambitious art of our time, including the kinds of collaborative, activist and relational art that seem far removed from the question of intimacy.

In keeping with the idea of a return to critical models from the past, I would like to recall Hal Foster's 1994 essay "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" In doing so, I am well aware that I am mixing apples and oranges, feminism and avant-garde, and do so precisely to question the place of feminism within contemporary avant-garde production. The work I propose as an exemplary model of engaged practice is Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* of 2003, which I will return to in the pages below. My reasons for selecting this piece includes not only its answer to the recurring feminist slogan that "the personal is political," but also its meaning in the context of a feminist-inspired institutional critique and a psychoanalytically-informed subjectivization of cultural politics. In "What's Neo", Hal Foster examined the ways in which postwar artists recovered and attempted to transform the strategies of the historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. The purpose of his essay was to provide a tempered assessment of the work of postwar artists that problematized the pessimistic view of the neo-avant-gardes provided by Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.² As Jochen Schulte-Strausse correctly asserted in the foreword to the 1984 English translation of this book, Bürger's Marxist approach would not necessarily prove to be compatible with French post-structuralism, a relative incommensurability that is teased out by Foster through his use of the psychoanalytic concept of 'deferred action.' Whereas Bürger concluded his book with the view that an adequate theory – and therefore, an adequate practice – of engaged art does not exist, Foster argued that 50s artists undertook the important work of recovering avant-garde strategies like collage, montage, the readymade and construction principles. While the 50s artists succeeded in doing so against institutional constraints, they nevertheless cancelled the prewar critique of the "institution of art" (Bürger) by allowing its strategies to become, in turn, institutionalized and appropriated by the culture industries. This fact led 60s artists like Broodthaers, Buren and Asher to develop strategies that resisted accommodation through the exploration of the frameworks of artistic production and reception.

Notwithstanding Foster's complex model of temporality and effectiveness, what I want to mention here is what his essay suggests for the critical pertinence of the contemporary practices of the 90s in relation to the legacy of the avant-garde. Most telling in his essay, in this regard, is the assertion that "Our present is chastened by feminist critiques of revolutionary language as well as by other suspicions about the exclusivity not just of art institutions but of critical discourses as well."³ Contemporary artists, he argued, engage in strategic collaborations and subtle displacements – nothing here we couldn't also find in historical precedents. The crucial distinction is that a critique of the avant-garde and its class politics progresses today through the probing of gender, ethnic and sexual differences, as noticed in the work of artists like David Hammons, Robert Gober and Andrea Fraser.

The value of the construct of the avant-garde, then, would appear to be not only its relation to the radical transformation and reproduction of the sphere of cultural production, its revelation

of the inconsequence of autonomy with regard to its economic determinations, but its flexibility with regard to social structures other than those associated with militant or revolutionary class politics. The relation between avant-gardism and identity struggles was raised by the Montreal art critic and historian Johanne Lamoureux in her *Réponse à Hal Foster*.⁴ On this same subject of the relevance of avant-garde discourse to contemporary deconstructive and feminist practices, Lamoureux argued that all practices that are critical expose and derail the aporias of the systems that seek to contain them.⁵ In a more recent essay on the concept of the avant-garde, Lamoureux draws on feminist art history, in particular, Carol Duncan's landmark essay "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting" (1982), in order to draw out the gendered, masculinist and conformist bias of the nineteenth-century avant-garde, as first noted by Charles Baudelaire in the 1860s. Against the *doxa* that the avant-garde represents a sophisticated class of cultural actors, Lamoureux suggests that the virtues of originality or metropolitanism were never universally held and that avant-gardism was, as early as the 1850s, an "institutionalized variant of everyone's gambit."⁶ The real avant-garde, including Courbet, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Cezanne and Gauguin involved those who ignored or rejected it. However, as the story goes, they eventually rejected it only to project their difference onto the screen of a gendered or racially marked other, appropriating codes from outside the European canon and simultaneously invalidating claims to innovation. The question of progress, then, comes full circle in the postwar period with the rise of anti-colonial movements, civil rights, feminism, gay rights and antiwar protest.

Lamoureux concludes her essay with the question: "How are we to articulate and assess the relevance of the avant-garde for contemporary art practices?" Traits that proved insufferable, she writes, are not as invariable as they once seemed inasmuch as they are transformed under the pressure of feminist and postcolonial theory and aid in the making visible of hybrid and fluid identity positions" within reconfigured social and cultural spaces. Avant-garde criticality, it seems, has its uses. The constructive omission in Lamoureux's text, however, becomes apparent when she argues that the 'performativity' of a contemporary critical practice does not need to be labeled avant-garde. What, we might ask, does the historicization of the concept of the avant-garde leave behind and how do class politics come into play, if at all? Opting for Foster's model of negotiation against Bürger's model of hibernation, Lamoureux looks to identity and performativity theory to rescue the avant-garde's testing of institutional boundaries.

What might a critical practice gain, however, from not testing or transgressing institutional limits, but in the tradition of radical autonomy, reflexively exposes the rules of the game? If Bürger's argument that the social function of art does not depend on particular works, but on the institutions themselves, then the persuasive force of the avant-garde may not be to demonstrate modes of liberation or creative innovation, but the modes of domination within which works are produced. Inasmuch as the culture industries seek to eliminate this tension between institution and critique, artists' protests tend, in the present, to draw on ever more intimate aspects of the self, on affect and sexuality as signifiers of subjectivity. In this respect, the question of neo-feminism becomes particularly acute.

The relation between the provision of an artistic service and the creative industries' search for new markets in identities, lifestyles, and all manner of 'living labour' provides a framework for understanding Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* of 2003. For this piece Fraser made arrangements with the Friedrich Petzel Gallery to find a collector who would agree to have sex with the artist and for the exchange to be documented. The result is a silent 60-minute videotape of Fraser meeting an unidentified man in a hotel room. The work stipulated that the collector be heterosexual and unmarried. The unedited video was shot with a stationary camera



and used the room's existing lighting. The single-channel video, which is shown in galleries on a small monitor, earned the artist a fee of \$20,000US, with additional returns from the limited edition copies. In it, the artist and her collector have drinks, foreplay, have intercourse for approximately ten minutes, and for the next twenty minutes engage in post-coital cuddling and pillow talk.

Untitled is a development of what Fraser considers to be a feminist institutional critique that makes use of subjectivity as an institutionally conditioned site of fantasy and identification. In a 2003 roundtable on feminism and art, she stated that she understands her work as an effort to integrate the interventional aspects of 70s feminist art into her engagement with the construction of female subject positions within art discourse.⁸ She further stated that an ethics of institutional critique, understood through the prism of feminist site-specificity and a critical reflexivity toward sexed subjectivity, demanded that she be concerned with the condition of being dominant – all the while recognizing the status of the artists as, in Bourdieu's terms, the dominated sector of the dominant class. This awareness led her away from explicitly feminist concerns, by and large ratified by cultural institutions, toward an engagement with what she considered "the most determining [economic] forces" of the sites in which she worked.

In an essay on the fate of institutional critique in the midst of collective, transversal and activist challenges to cognitive capitalism, Brian Holmes suggests that work like Fraser's leads to complacency, immobility and loss of autonomy, a "governmentality of failure, where the subject can do no more than contemplate his or her own psychic prison, with a few aesthetic luxuries in compensation."⁹ Against Holmes' urge to move beyond the limits of artistic and academic discipline, I think it urgent to consider the complexity of Fraser's avant-garde gambit. In her 1994 essay on "How to Provide an Artistic Service," and the corresponding artwork with Helmut Draxler, *Services*, Fraser examined the economic definition of service provision, a "value which is consumed at the same time as it is produced," as part of an exploration of the working conditions of art professionals. Dependence, she concluded, is the condition of artistic autonomy; independence is a matter of determining for ourselves who and how we serve. What makes Fraser's discussion of professional ideology particularly important for us at this juncture in the age of cognitive capitalism and the creative industries is that it recognizes the problem of polarization that Marx identified in relation to nonproductive labour, defined as being neither wage labour nor ownership of the means of production. The growth of a nonproductive service and professional salariat, subject to the economic downgrading of the working class but identifying with middle class status and values,

was later theorized by Siegfried Kracauer in *The Salaried Masses* (1930), by C. Wright Mills in *White Collar* (1953) and more recently by Hardt and Negri in *Empire* (1994).

What makes works like *Untitled* pertinent to question of the relation of neo-feminism to neo-avant-garde, then, is its claim to critical autonomy, its distance from economic principles of hierarchization. Not only does her dual-action performance allow her to "get rich," it does so against the post-political, late capitalist insistence that one grease the machine of relational networks and against the domination of what Slavoj Žižek calls *metapolitics*, where political antagonism is fully asserted, only to be ascribed to another scene – the economic sphere – where it is more properly played out.¹⁰ As early as Lenin's essay on "Part Organization and Party Literature" (1905) it has been clear that the socialist avant-gardes had more than art's autonomy at heart. The questions that prominent thinkers like Žižek are today asking requires that we consider the relative importance of State and parliamentary politics in a conjuncture where the farcical repetition of a heroic revolutionary Party may also have its delayed efficacy. Such a Party may have as grounds for its historical intervention the necessary delegitimation of pluralist negotiation and identity-based claims to difference. If such a Party existed, the force of intimacy would no doubt find its correlate in the organization of its own vanishing; the personal too would become *metapolitical*.

MARC JAMES LÉGER

Marc James Léger is an artist and writer living in Montreal.

NOTES

- 1 Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October* #70 (Fall 1994) 5-32.
- 2 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1974] 1984).
- 3 Foster, 26.
- 4 Johanne Lamoureux, *Réponse à Hal Foster: ou le 'recyclage' comme répétition esthétique*, *Protée* (automne 1995) 80-83.
- 5 Lamoureux, 82.
- 6 T.J. Clark cited in Lamoureux, "Avant-Garde: A Historiography of a Critical Concept," in Amelia Jones, ed. *A Companion to Contemporary Art: Since 1945* (London: Blackwell, 2006) 195.
- 7 Lamoureux, "Avant-Garde," 207.
- 8 Andrea Fraser in "Feminism & Art: 9 Views," *Artforum* (October 2003) 142.
- 9 Brian Holmes, "Extradisciplinary Investigations: Towards a New Critique of Institutions," *Transversal* (January 2007): <http://eicpc.net/transversal/0106/holmes>.
- 10 See Slavoj Žižek's discussion of the forms of disavowal of the proper logic of political antagonism in "A Leftist Plea for 'Eurocentrism'," in *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings, Volume Two*, edited by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006) 183-208.