

**Katy Deepwell, ed., *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1995, 201 pp., 65 black-and-white illus.**

**Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970's, History and Impact*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1994, 318 pp., 118 colour plates, 152 black-and-white illus.**

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the credit of the reigning pontiff who is the ultimate manifestation of this divine force at work in the world.

Readers of Mandel's study are likely to be persuaded by much of her analysis and in particular of her overall assessment of the programme's meaning and of her belief that the pope himself had a hand, if at a distance, in the formulation of some of the iconography. Her proposal of Pompeo Ugonio as the principal intellect behind the programme, too, is plausible. Mandel's contribution thus constitutes a welcome advance in our understanding of the Sixtine pontificate as both culmination of Renaissance traditions and harbinger of later Baroque developments in image making in the service of papal ideology.

Some readers, however, may wish there had been a still greater effort beyond that made by the author to examine issues of use and accessibility. Lacking is a more down-to-earth context for the iconographic abstractions and ideological conceits behind the images. The monofocus on the programme overlooks factors of import to the interpretation of the painted scenes. Frescoed imagery is bound with the architectural unit it surrounds or covers and must be understood in that specific spatial context. The rooms of the Lateran Palace, like those of secular palaces, were designed in functional sequences and with different purposes in mind according to size, location within the sequence, and siting within the overall plan of the building. Knowledge of these practical architectural factors provides insight into the selection and meaning of the painted imagery.

Even a superficial look at the plan of the *piano nobile* at the Lateran Palace reveals the anomalous inclusion of two major *saloni* (the *Sala dei Papi* and the *Sala di Costantino*). Neither Palazzo Farnese, the supposed model for the Lateran Palace, nor other secular palaces of the period contain two comparable spaces. This arrangement suggests a special requirement at the Lateran, or at least in papal palaces, that may be reflected as well in the painted programme.

Awareness of room function will help identify the likely target audience of any pictorial component of a given spa-

tial unit, and knowledge of the rank of the intended viewer will aid the historian in establishing parameters for the interpretation. It is important to keep in mind, for example, that, notwithstanding the supercharged Counter-Reformation rhetoric of the Lateran cycle, it can hardly have been conceived for Protestant eyes. A more precise and detailed identification of room function and the status of persons admitted to each room therefore remain desiderata to be integrated with the analysis of the fresco cycle.

Mandel's interpretive assumptions call to the fore an important issue confronting the student of meaning in the imagery of the Renaissance and Baroque. That painted programmes in this period, especially those generated in courtly intellectual circles, might be read on many levels at once is a common claim, although documented examples remain rare. Undeniably, the heraldic and emblematic imagery, as deployed throughout the Lateran cycle, conveys a primary meaning well beyond its literal one (of a lion standing on three abstract mountains, for example). Mandel, however, argues for a "polysemous reading" that allows many complementary meanings for each individual image, each room of images, and for the entire cycle. Thus the ubiquitous obelisks, columns and heraldic lions can refer not only to Sixtus but also to Moses, Samuel, Elijah, John the Baptist, Constantine and St Francis all at once, although only one or, sometimes, none of these personages is visibly present in the scene (p. 172).

We cannot rule out that some learned contemporary of Sixtus, or even the pope himself, might have engaged in a multilayered reading that widely exceeded the limits of the actual imagery apparent to his eyes. Can, however, the historian who seeks to build a persuasive argument supporting the exegesis of an image fruitfully explore a speculative realm remote from the visual evidence? Will it not prove more judicious and profitable for the interpreter to adhere, instead, to the primary, pictorially verifiable meaning?

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KATY DEEPWELL, ed., *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1995, 201 pp., 65 black-and-white illus.

NORMA BROUDE AND MARY D. GARRARD, eds, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970's, History and Impact*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1994, 318 pp., 118 colour plates, 152 black-and-white illus.

Has feminist art criticism transcended its traditionally sanctioned peripheral publishing boundaries? The small-print

books and anthologies with few or no reproductions which are produced by under-financed independent publishing houses? The academic art journals which have an interest in the "new art histories" and view feminism as one of the many "marginalized" subject positions from which to write? Specialized journals and magazines with feminist agendas which may include a section on the "arts"? And perhaps sporadically, a depoliticized text from a large publisher which allows them to state that they produce "feminist" publications?<sup>1</sup> Into this publishing "colony" enter two re-

cent feminist anthologies: *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies* edited by Katy Deepwell, and *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970's, History and Impact* jointly edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard. Although to some the two anthologies may appear antipodal, representing the different poles which exist for feminist art criticism, it is not my intention to present them as binary opposites. Rather, I would like to determine whether through collapsing and folding their differences we can position them as surpassing the publishing perimeters of feminist art criticism.

While I do not want to position the anthologies antithetically, it is important to locate their differences. *New Feminist Art Criticism* is the product of the 1992 Decennial Conference of the Women Artists Slide Library (now the Women's Art Library) on "Feminist Art Criticism: into the 1990's." The anthology attempts to position feminist art criticism of the first half of this decade and engages with issues such as contemporary theory and practice, curating, censorship, psychoanalysis and textile art. *The Power of Feminist Art* aims to document the American feminist art movement of the 1970s. The majority of the contributors are art historians and artists who were participants in this movement. *New Feminist Art Criticism* is theoretically weighty and engages with contemporary art production; *The Power of Feminist Art* is historical and encompasses a blend of personal reflections and archival documentation. *The Power of Feminist Art* is a high-quality hard cover, with 270 illustrations (118 in full colour) and an illustrated fold-out time line, while *New Feminist Art Criticism* is available in soft cover and includes 65 black-and-white reproductions.

Where these two apparently diverse publications begin to concur is in their mutual rejection (although located and positioned differently) of the binarisms created within feminism and feminist theory by writers of the 1980s. Janet Wolff in "The Artist, the Critic and the Academic: Feminism's Problematic Relationship with 'Theory'," *New Feminist Art Criticism*, calls for feminism to evaluate critically the binarisms which defined and delimited feminism in the 1980s: scripto-visual work versus painting, deconstruction versus celebration, theory versus experience, and elitism versus accessibility. Wolff suggests that these categories are not mutually exclusive but rather can (and should) traverse each other at multiple intervals (p. 15). More pointedly, Mira Schor, in her essay "Backlash and Appropriation" for *The Power of Feminist Art*, asks in whose interests is it to have feminism divided by various schisms or binarisms, and specifically cites the divisions between essentialism and post-structuralism (anti-essentialism) (p. 259).

Collapsing binarisms should not be interpreted as a

desire to (re)create the concept of a monolithic feminism. Acknowledgement of the different experiences of women according to class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and physical (dis)ability is fundamental. Rather, the wish to diffuse the polemic divides of feminism is perhaps motivated by the recognition of the limited financial and temporal resources of the discourse; if feminism devotes all or most of its energy to arguing against and within itself, how can it contest patriarchal social systems? Such contestation can only begin in earnest when energy is redirected from internal differences. Without creating totalizing hegemonies, seemingly opposite political positions might consider their intersections and push on.<sup>2</sup>

In order to topple and enfold the dichotomies of the texts, I will use each to read against the grain of the other. Theoretical work is often criticized for its lack of history, and historical work for its lack of theory. In attempting to locate feminist art criticism of the 1990s, the contributors to *New Feminist Art Criticism* delve into the labyrinth of contemporary theory and theoretical debates. Janis Jefferies, for instance, in "Text and Textiles: Weaving Across the Borderlines" positions contemporary textile artists at the centre of postmodern debates concerning hybridity, marginalization and the relationship between text and textiles (p. 164). What is lacking in Jefferies' text, and in the other essays in *New Feminist Art Criticism*, is a consideration of history. Contemporary theoretical analyses do not preclude consideration of historical work, and indeed such work is highly recuperable. Feminist critiques of art history underscore that women as producers of art are more than a contemporary phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

*The Power of Feminist Art* highlights the 1970s in the United States as a period when women artists were active producers and attempts to provide a comprehensive documentation of their contributions. The individual texts are compiled from personal memories and are supported in many cases by descriptive documentation such as names, dates and events. Few of the contributors, however, address their research from a theoretical position, and despite the romantic nostalgia which is created by remembrances such as Carrie Rickey's of Lucy Lippard typing national feminist newsletters on her manual Remington (p. 122), what could amount to a powerful document loses academic credibility. To be fair, however, not all of the contributors are unaware of the limits of the framework of the anthology. For example, Linda Nochlin, writing about her experiences in the 1970s in "Starting From Scratch: The Beginnings of Feminist Art History," astutely states, "My fuzziness about these issues is a poignant reminder to historians about the unreliability of witness accounts, espe-

cially when the witness is identical with the historian in question" (p. 132).

History(ies) are always subjective. However, when descriptive research is paired with theoretical analysis, the deleterious potential of "blind spots" is perhaps lessened. Interestingly, Moira Roth, the one writer who contributes to both texts, manages to illuminate her own potential blind spots and blur the borders between theory and history. In *New Feminist Art Criticism* she contributes "Reading Between the Lines: The Imprinted Spaces of Sutapa Biswas" in which she writes in two voices, one her personal remembrances of her initial encounters with the work of Biswas, the other a distanced theoretical commentary on Biswas' work. Roth continually considers the work of Biswas from both a historical context, that is England's colonization of India, as well as from her own position in relation to this as a white academic. She writes "... how shall I read these images of a woman and her world? Is this the world of 'a woman', or 'Woman', or of Sutapa Biswas? Of an Indian woman in an Indian world, or an abstract portrait of human presence in a world of nature and art?" (p. 34).

In *The Power of Feminist Art* Roth and co-author Yolanda M. Lopez in "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism" approach the critical issue of racism within the activism of the feminist movement in the 1970s. The authors begin by acknowledging their different subject positions and then move on to discuss their memories of the early feminist movement. Their recollections are joined by contemporary theories of post-coloniality, and reflect on the historical events without trying to explain or justify them. The combination of the historical documentation with the theoretical approach provides a succinct and critical analysis which allows for the subjectivity of the authors to be acknowledged.

The question is then why are there so few feminist art publications that successfully integrate theory and history?<sup>4</sup> This desire is a subjective one. There are many feminists who would argue that theoretical works are inaccessible and thus elitist. This debate, between elitism and accessibility, is addressed by both anthologies and centres on questions of language and audience. If the language being used becomes too obscure for the audience, then the text loses its political viability; if, however, the language in an attempt to become accessible becomes too simple to encompass complex ideas, then it runs the risk of offending its audience with gross simplifications. In her *New Feminist Art Criticism* essay entitled "The Sphinx Contemplating Napoleon: Black Women Artists in Britain," author Gilane Tawadros calls for the development of a specific theoretical language where, as a means of encompassing the specificities of the

black female Diaspora in Britain, the discourses of feminism and post-colonial theory converge. The issues that feminism deals with, that is, questions of systemic oppression by patriarchal social/economic/political/personal forces, are complex issues and even more complex when they are considered, as they must be, with the intersection of class, race and other markers of "difference." The need to articulate the specificity of individual experience, according to Tawadros, demands new languages, both written and visual, and must vigilantly resist the universalizing tendency which texts written in "accessible language" can produce.<sup>5</sup>

To argue for the specificity or complexity of language, however, is not to endorse obscurantism. Indeed, important feminist texts such as Christine Battersby's contribution to *New Feminist Art Criticism*, "Just Jamming: Irigaray, Painting and Psychoanalysis," which attempts to make intricate texts such as Irigaray's reading of Lacan more accessible to a general audience, are significant in that they do make sophisticated texts more understandable and thus insure against accusations of elitism.

The value of an accessible text lies in its ability to reach a large audience. The personal reflections and description of events, places and names which comprise the content of *The Power of Feminist Art* create an accessible document for a general audience. There is much to be said for the creation of a larger audience for feminist art criticism. Conversely, simplification and depoliticization are grave dangers of which feminism should still be wary. Publications aimed at a general readership are seldom able to recognize or articulate the systemic nature of the problems they address. Moreover, they do much to fuel contemporary internal debates within feminism and may, due to the limited resources available for feminist research, prevent other more sophisticated work from making it into print.

Linked closely to the discussion of language are the essentialist/anti-essentialist debates. Post-structural approaches which are used by theorists and artists who would be considered anti-essentialist (such as Griselda Pollock and Mary Kelly) are accused of elitism and inaccessibility by theorists or artists who are aligned with essentialist approaches. Conversely, the celebratory imagery which is used by artists who have been labelled essentialist (such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro) are accused of creating a homogeneous category "Woman" which cannot encompass the multiplicity of experiences of women across markers of difference.

Throughout *The Power of Feminist Art*, the charges of essentialism which have been laid against much of the feminist art production of the 1970s are addressed. For example, in their introduction Broude and Garrard state that it

was advantageous for women in the 1970s to identify themselves as a group in order to "solidify their opposition to oppression" (p. 25). Various contributors follow suit, including Arlene Raven in her discussion of Womanhouse (Los Angeles, 1972) and Josephine Wither in her discussion of feminist performance art (p. 158), both of whom discuss the 1970s' political necessity of creating celebratory feminist art. Further, contributors Suzanne Lacy, "Affinities: Thoughts on An Incomplete History," Laura Cottingham, "The Feminist Continuum: Art After 1970," and Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," attempt to create a continuum between the celebratory work of the 1970s and contemporary work by artists such as Barbara Kurger, Cindy Sherman, Martha Rosler and Kiki Smith.

In contrast the texts in *New Feminist Art Criticism* could be loosely organized around anti-essentialist approaches. Rather than addressing the debate from the extreme positions adopted by theorists such as Denise Riley or Donna Haraway,<sup>6</sup> the contributors attempt to negotiate more flexible positions. Hilary Robinson, for instance, in "Border Crossings: Womanliness, Body, Representation" looks at recent art production by women artists such as Genevieve Cadieux, Helen Chadwick, Pauline Cummius, Louise Walsh, Laura Godfrey Isaacs and Annett Messenger. This work, proposes Robinson, locates the specificity of gendered bodily experience while denying an essential femininity. Rather, she suggests that such experiences are socially and culturally constructed. Perhaps, however, where Robinson's theory begins to fall in on itself is in its application to the work only of contemporary post-structuralist artists. It would be a valuable project to attempt to read the feminist production of the 1970s from a similar theoretical position. Not only would such a reading potentially strengthen the theory, but it could recuperate the work of artists such as Chicago and Schapiro, as well as other women artists whom have fallen into virtual obscurity due largely to accusations of essentialism.

It is here that blurring borders becomes an issue. If less dogmatic positions are adopted, essentialist categories can be invoked and deconstructed as demanded by the situation. Gayatri Spivak has deemed this type of intervention "strategic essentialism." "Strategic essentialism" is the use of "essential" categories such as a "Woman" when it is politically necessary, while simultaneously acknowledging and critiquing their limitations. Such a strategy creates criticism which allows for collective agency and solidarity, while recognizing the limited usefulness and potential danger of such categories.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the celebratory work of the 1970s can be essentialist, and the essentialism can be acknowledged as socially constructed. Further contemporary production

of black British women artists, such as discussed earlier by Tawadros, can provisionally utilize essential identity categories when politically necessary.

It is with the above framework that I would like to consider the location of the two anthologies within the broader publishing sphere of feminist art criticism. Although throughout the review I have been folding the two texts together, they represent two distinctive approaches to feminist art criticism. Strategically, *The Power of Feminist Art* is important for its documentation of the pivotal events in the development of feminist art in the 1970s. Its lack of self-reflexivity and theoretical inquiry, however, recreates many of the problems of 1970s artistic production. Such a lack of perspicacity limits its academic credibility and to a large extent depoliticizes an important feminist moment. *New Feminist Art Criticism* attempts to locate diverse directions for theoretical investigations of the artistic production of contemporary women artists and successfully positions itself on the cutting edge of contemporary feminist theory. However, by limiting its scope to artistic production which itself is a participant in similar inquiries, it lacks a consideration of history which can ground such work. It would, however, be too simplistic an analysis to polarize the two anthologies within the traditionally sanctioned peripheries of feminist art criticism. Rather, both perhaps can be read as stretching those boundaries and creating expanded space for further work.

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- 1 The impetus to view the two anthologies within the context of feminist publishing comes from Frances Borzello's essay "Preaching to the Converted? Feminist Art Publishing in the 1980's" in Deepwell, ed., *New Feminist Art Criticism* (Manchester, 1995), 20-25.
- 2 For an excellent discussion of the "differences" within feminist debate, see Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York, 1994), 146-72.
- 3 Amanda Vickery in "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal*, XXXVI, no. 3 (1993), 383-414, articulates the importance of demonstrating women's transgression of the ideology of separate spheres, which she states is "an ancient trope of western writing" and a peril of academic feminism. Feminist research which focuses on the production of historical women artists indeed manages to transgress such dialect polarities.
- 4 This being said, there are some excellent examples of historical research informed by a theoretical framework, for example: Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (Lon-

don and New York, 1993); Gen Doy, *Seeing and Consciousness: Women, Class, and Representation* (Oxford/Washington, D.C., 1995); and Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (Chicago, 1988).

- 5 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Difference: A Special Third World Women's Issue," in her *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989), 95, eloquently discusses how language can enclose identity and experience; words are "deceiving and limiting."

- 6 Riley and Haraway are both cited by Naomi Schor in "This Essentialism Which is Not One," in Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, eds, *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), 59, as representing the extreme anti-essentialist position.

- 7 Gayatri Spivak discusses the term "Strategic Essentialism" in an interview with Ellen Rooney in Schor and Weed, eds, *The Essential Difference*, 151.

REESA GREENBERG, BRUCE W. FERGUSON, SANDY NAIRNE, eds, *Thinking About Exhibitions*. London and New York, Routledge, 1996, 507 pp., 83 illus.

The editors of *Thinking About Exhibitions* make the insightful observation in their brief introduction that anthologies and exhibitions are very much alike: from the revealing biases in the selection of contributions, to the assumption of totality and the aura of authority that accompanies the presentation of collected documents, anthologies and exhibitions make use of the same strategies of selection and combination to circumscribe their subject. But as the editors make evident, any closure is illusory:

With art exhibitions and anthologies, objects and texts are always assembled and arranged according to an arbitrary schema intended to construct and convey meaning. In their mega forms – the blockbuster, the retrospective: collections of complete works or compilations which inaugurate or consolidate a discipline – they lay claim to being exhaustive when they are always incomplete (and often only exhausting). ... The totality which many art exhibitions and anthologies seem to claim to embody is a fiction and even a fantasy. (p.1)

A central feature of this introduction, then, is its unwillingness to contain the essays that constitute the anthology. Unlike many curatorial essays of exhibition catalogues, the Introduction does not seek to position its objects (the essays) within a framework already delineated by the curators (editors). Instead, the Introduction serves as a kind of methodological user's manual, exposing the choices made, recognizing the slippage of texts from one section of the book to another, and acknowledging the situatedness of the essays' themes within recent European and North American cultural and intellectual debates. In choosing to outline the process of organizing the anthology's contents rather than attempting a summation of the articles themselves, the editors have written the kind of self-reflexive essay consonant with their interest in the discursive nature of exhibitions.

Organized into six sections, the twenty-seven essays in *Thinking About Exhibitions* cover a broad range, both topically and geographically. The sections formally divide the essays according to questions of history, spectatorship, the exploration of exhibitions in linguistic terms, the expansion of the role of curator, a reading of exhibiting spaces, and an analysis of exhibitionary forms. As the essays argue, the materiality of the display is the crucial feature in the understanding of the exhibition, and thus the placement of essays within this anthology is itself an example of considered display. It is of particular interest in the ordering of essays that a text which asks "What's Important about the History of Modern Art Exhibitions?" should appear in a book about the exhibition of contemporary art, not at the beginning as a historical point of departure, but at the end.

Underlying most of the essays in the anthology is a conception of the exhibition as fiction, an argument which maintains that art exhibitions do not simply present objects as a series of discrete entities within a neutral space, but inevitably construct narratives in the selection, combination and organization of objects for display. The contention that exhibitions have messages is certainly not a novel one. The ideological underpinnings of art and museum exhibitions have been an important topic of discussion in recent decades from a number of fronts. Since the early 1970s, the exclusion of women artists from the permanent displays of most art museums has generated much protest and has raised important questions concerning the construction of art historical canons and the relations of power within the art world that maintain them.<sup>1</sup> Emerging from a similar awareness of an institutional disposition towards entrenching power relations was the move in critical anthropology to expose the recurrence of the salvage paradigm in museum displays as well as in critical texts.<sup>2</sup> While these and other critical moments in cultural analysis have been important in making apparent the constructed nature of exhibitions and the disciplinary formations that underscore them, such critiques have largely remained at the level of political bean-counting: a statistical accountability where