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CHAPTER NINE  
FETISHISM AND THE STORIES  
OF FEMINIST ART

ALEXANDRA M. KOKOLI

[E]very image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (The good tidings which the historian of the past brings with throbbing heart may be lost in a void the moment he opens his mouth.)<sup>1</sup>

—Walter Benjamin

**Is Feminism History?<sup>2</sup>**

Feminism in art history finds itself at an interesting intersection. Having long lost its links to activism, and with much of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory (on which it drew, and which it irreversibly transformed) now seemingly depleted of their radical potential, feminism in art history—and art—takes stock and looks to the future. If the mostly justifiably maligned prefix “post-” before feminism<sup>3</sup> is to be redeemed for the present, it would have to be redefined as an internal break within feminist thinking that allows feminism itself to become the object of historical and theoretical investigations, even revisions. If feminist thought and action are, at their best, critique and not doxa,<sup>4</sup> then now might be an

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<sup>1</sup> “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, 247.

<sup>2</sup> I owe this phrase to Elena Gualtieri, though it has very likely been used by others. Its ambiguity, as I suggest in this chapter, informs most self-reflective feminist writing after the second wave.

<sup>3</sup> For an influential discussion of the sexual politics of American art discourse in the 1980s, see Amelia Jones, “‘Post-feminism’: A Remasculinization of Culture” (1990), where she describes “post-feminism” as “the insidious project currently at work to dis-arm feminists, coaxing us into sympathy with the broad postmodernist project by flattery, then extinguishing our tracks behind us”, 504.

<sup>4</sup> Pollock, “The Politics of Theory”, 5.

opportune time to turn this sharp, sophisticated and eclectic feminist critique on feminism itself. Yet, the internal break that allows for this kind of introspection is as much an opportunity as a site of danger; beneath any effort to review past feminisms lies the punning question “is feminism history?” This should not be treated as a rhetorical question, as its ambiguity sheds light on the intricacies of self-examination for a movement that has all but been absorbed in scholarship and, perhaps, some art practice. Even the most positive interpretation, that feminism is finally part of history, that it has made it into (its own and other) “history books”, is not without its problems. Like all programmatically dissenting voices, feminism is familiar with the anxiety of the revolutionary outsider that any ground gained in the academy, museums, the art markets – what has been termed “visibility”—is lost in the stakes of radicalism and the exhilarating potential of intervening from “the elsewhere”, which is however implied by representation by being excluded from, or rather repressed by it.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, a great (and perhaps growing) number of events, symposia and publications belie any suggestion of an ending. In 2006, the annual conference of the British Association of Art Historians (AAH) hosted the academic session “Whither Feminist Art History?”, convened by Francesca Berry and Amy Mechowski, which was extremely well-attended and critically praised. The College Art Association annual conference of 2006 included six sessions on evolving feminist perspectives (e.g. “Impact of New Feminisms”; “Between Feminisms”) and many more that featured gender prominently. In January 2007, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, hosted the two-day symposium *The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts*, which aimed to address the prospects of feminism in the arts through the assessment of its past: panels included “Writing the History of Feminism”, with presentations by Ute Meta Bauer, Connie Butler, David Joselit and Griselda Pollock.<sup>6</sup> In 2005, Norma Broude and Mary Garrard published the third volume of their on-going anthologisation of feminist art historical writing, in which they advocate a return to real world issues, arguing that decades of theoretical engagement have led feminism to an intellectual (specifically but not exclusively art historical) but also political impasse.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> De Lauretis, “The Technology of Gender”, 25.

<sup>6</sup> The symposium schedule is available on the MoMA website, from which audio and video recordings also be downloaded <[www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)>.

<sup>7</sup> *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*; on the editors stance on theory, see my forthcoming review in *Art History* (2008). This volume was preceded by *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*

As its title suggests, *Women Artists at the Millennium*, edited by Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher, published in 2006 and based on a conference of the same name held at Princeton in 2001, proposes to combine retrospection with looking to the future. In her preface, Armstrong underlines the interconnectedness of the two with a rumination on the ethical purpose of art, which she describes as follows: “to make you see, think, and feel anew—not ‘new’ in the sense of modernist novelty, but ‘anew’ in the generative sense, which is to say again but as if for the first time”.<sup>8</sup> 2001 saw the publication of the first and only, as far as I know, coffee table book on art and feminism, thoughtfully edited by Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan. *Art and Feminism* is extremely prepossessing and richly illustrated, as one would expect, but also more scholarly than most in its genre, containing a selection of writings on feminism and/or art (190-287) and a “Survey” (14-49) by Phelan in lieu of an introduction, where she attacks the “theoretical condensations of feminist art” in favour of “the possibilities of romancing feminism and art”.<sup>9</sup> Such “romancing” opens the way for unlikely encounters, e.g. between Aboriginal dot paintings and Cindy Sherman’s *Film Stills*, and allows for the alphabetical listing of all featured artists and writers on the cover, crowded under a detail from Geneviève Cadieux’s photographic installation *Hear me with your Eyes* (1989), a pair of sensually parted female lips in extreme close-up. The list is inspiring for its non-hierarchical inclusiveness, efficiently demonstrating the breadth and variety of women’s work in the visual arts. At the same time, however, the proximity of artists as politically and aesthetically disparate as Vanessa Beecroft and Jo Spence, or Nancy Spero and Annie Sprinkle, can be disorienting if not misleading, especially to those less familiar with feminism (and/or art). And whereas the fact that “success”, however this may be measured, professional status or institutional and commercial affiliations are rightly not among the selection criteria for the showcased artists, the resulting equation between the influential and the marginalised, those who are taught in Art History and Visual Arts programmes in higher education and those who aren’t, those who manage to live off their art and those who don’t, displays a disregard of pragmatic and material(ist) considerations that could be deemed ideological.

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(1982), charting the beginnings of a feminist problematic in art history in the 1970s, while *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (1992) interrogated feminist art history’s engagement with theory.

<sup>8</sup> Armstrong, “Preface”, *Women Artists at the Millennium*, xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Phelan, “Survey”, *Art and Feminism*, 17.

The ambiguity of the question “is feminism history?” runs through and is transformed by each of these disparate events and publications, each of which is in and of itself valuable and encouraging. There is, I think, an underlying acknowledgement that for feminism to survive, it needs to (also) become history, it needs to become the object of its own historicisation. Each in their own way, these events and publications interrogate how and to what extent should dealing with the feminist past inform, or rather be part of, the making of feminist futures. Responses often take the form of pessimistic evaluations of the (limited) impact of political feminisms in society, the mixed blessings of feminist theory and institutionalisation, and unproductive (if not destructive) internal disputes. Sometimes they lead to proposals for the reinvention of feminism in the new century, not only acknowledging the mistakes of the past, but affirming and celebrating its on-going interventions in critical thinking, academic work, interdisciplinarity, and championing the continued relevance of staple concerns, questions, and methodologies.<sup>10</sup> Writing anew on Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1973-78)<sup>11</sup> in 1999, Griselda Pollock argues for contextually cultural re-readings of key feminist work that become possible only in retrospection, and which could:

address the conditions of possibility that were articulated into a project, whose full legibility and significance requires the distance of time to identify not so much what existed at its point of origin, to enable such an intervention to be conceived, but how it belongs symptomatically to a wider picture that will now reveal its fuller historical meaning.<sup>12</sup>

In search of fertile futures, the histories of feminism are being cast anew; the stories of feminist art—and feminist art history—are now being written, with all the advantages and disadvantages of *distance*. It is precisely distance and its interpretations that are the crux of the endeavour

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<sup>10</sup> The essay collection *Feminist Consequences*, edited by Elizabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka, is a thoughtful example of such considerations. See esp. Kavka’s “Introduction”, ix-xxvi, and the contributions to Part 4 “Where to Feminism?”, 321-454.

<sup>11</sup> Dating artwork is always complicated, and even more so in the case of installation, which is only/best constituted in exhibitions. Here I am using the dates of Documentations I (1973) to VI (1978) to define the chronological limits of the whole work, with the caveat that each exhibition is a re-creation. The *Post-Partum Document* has also been “translated” into book form.

<sup>12</sup> Pollock, “Still Working on the Subject: Feminist Poetics at its Avant-Garde Moment”, 249-250.

of self-historicisation, and the upsetting punctum in the ambiguity of “is feminism history?”. Despite the benefits and even the necessity of distance, an acknowledgement of involvement is also required, as Benjamin suggests in the fifth of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: every “image” of the past must be “recognised by the present as one of its own concerns”, if it’s not to “disappear irretrievably”. So this needs to be a balancing act, made all the more difficult by the expectation of a continued alliance between the generations of feminism. Benjamin’s words are haunted by the intimation of filiation—“one of its own”—which has also been a prominent feminist concern. Although the fraught “mother-daughter plot” has always been much more than just a metaphor,<sup>13</sup> it takes a pressingly literal form as “the discourses of feminism and postfeminism are now contested among generations of women”.<sup>14</sup>

Distance can protect against slippages between feminism’s pasts and futures, often made in an effort to reconcile the rapture of the seventies with the modest gains of the new century. Although such slippages may be politically justified, they remain theoretically problematic. For, if the past must be recognised by the present as one of its own (concerns), it still needs to remain separate from it, just like for a mother-daughter sociality to finally come into being any over-identification between the two must be given up.<sup>15</sup> To put it differently, if the image of the past is allowed to blend into the landscape of the present, it might still be camouflaged out of sight. This blending of past and present is not necessarily the result of insisting on continuities, but can also be the side-effect of a dialectical perception of the history of the feminist movement. For example, in “Women’s Time”, Julia Kristeva envisages a future generation of feminists that reconciles maternal time (a combination of “cyclical” and “monumental time”) with the “linear time” of history and political change. Even as the author tries “to emphasise the multiplicity of female expressions and preoccupations so as not to homogenise ‘woman’”,<sup>16</sup> the text concludes with an assimilation of disparate positions into the diversity of “the signifying space” of the then new feminist generation.<sup>17</sup> Thus, if

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*.

<sup>14</sup> Mignon Nixon, “*The She-Fox: Transference and the ‘Woman Artist’*”, in Armstrong and de Zegher, *Women Artists at the Millenium*, 283.

<sup>15</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, 48.

<sup>16</sup> Toril Moi, introduction to “Women’s Time”, 187.

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva, 209. Admittedly, Kristeva’s complex essay does much more than anticipate a moment of feminist maturity and assimilation of past phases, and

the present is the culmination of past theses and antitheses, then although the past is obviously and by definition the concern of the present, it is only so in light of its contribution to the present and hence is implicitly shaped in the image of the present. Although one cannot speak of any autonomy of past moments without entering the realm of metaphysics, I support the preservation of the inassimilable moments, those that have remained unresolved, or that have been dealt with only partially, or in unsatisfactory ways; in simpler terms, I propose that it is worth interrogating what happens to the past that has been thwarted. This is hardly a new idea. In Pollock's words, "[f]eminism has to confront the question of strangeness, difference and violence within itself".<sup>18</sup>

This chapter has two aims. Firstly, to contribute to the exploration of the "strangeness and difference" within feminist art history, by foregrounding unresolved issues that have been passed on to new generations in the sense in which Kristeva uses the term, i.e. issues that have been translated into new signifying spaces. I will suggest that what is seemingly ancient history cannot but be repeated; what is forgotten is bound to return. Secondly, I propose to do so through interrogating the uses of "fetishism", a privileged term of analysis for reasons that will be explained. This discussion will hopefully point in the direction of a more general proposition: that theory has its own history, and at times, its own baggage; and that, moreover, working through such baggage should be the business of contemporary feminist theory, in and beyond its engagement with the visual.

### **Stories from Elsewhere**

The exploration of "strangeness, difference and violence" within feminism had already begun in the early days of the second wave, from the marginal position of women of colour in the women's movement. In the important essay "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood" (1982), Hazel Carby addresses her contemporary white

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raises some very intriguing questions that feminist theory continues to grapple with, notably about the future of identity politics after the dismantling of sexual difference (209-211). However, the essay is often read, not least by Moi herself, in terms of a Hegelian dialectic, with the emergent "generation" of feminism (at the time of writing in 1979) as representing the most "advanced" stage. Moreover, the utopian impetus of "Women's Time" strongly evokes a linear narrative progression through and beyond feminism, with no acknowledgement of the possibility of backtracking, obstacles, or the very real backlashes of the 1990s.

<sup>18</sup> Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 193.

British feminists and presents them with the demanding task of examining their own biases, by focusing on the role of white women in colonialism and by interrogating the unacknowledged whiteness of the second wave. In this early analysis of the triple oppression of gender, race and class, which has since been termed “intersectionality”, the author concludes that white feminists need not try to write the “herstories” of and for women of colour, but rather focus on the ways in which race had been written out of the feminist project.<sup>19</sup> Carby’s inferred separatism (that blackwomen’s herstories should only be written by blackwomen) and her insistence on this “negative” work for white feminists should be read in the context of a certain polemics of its time. If it had been followed to the letter, we would have been deprived of much valuable intellectual input, notably in art history, such as the insightful readings of Faith Ringgold’s work by Moira Roth, or Lubaina Himid by Griselda Pollock, or Sutapa Biswas’ by both.

Scrutinising absences and focusing on lags and omissions has without doubt been a big part of what feminism does, both at the moment of its emergence and in its self-reflective development. The emphasis on the unsaid is informed if not necessitated by the configuration of the feminine subject as the subject against all odds—written out of the symbolic and yet still *stealing* through. The discourse of/from the feminine, as Hélène Cixous among others has so eloquently conveyed,<sup>20</sup> is profoundly influenced by the unlikelihood of its existence and marked by the epistemic violence that had heretofore kept it repressed. So “feminine writing”, this umbrella term for the cultural production of the systemically repressed, does not only come into existence against the odds but is strange in and of itself for being at odds with the Symbolic, on which it must draw. This representation of the liminal position of the feminine subject of feminism has been extremely influential both in the second wave moment of the women’s movement as well as in explorations of what lay beyond the second wave, particularly from queer (“odd” and deliberately disorderly) perspectives.<sup>21</sup> A strategically centrifugal

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<sup>19</sup> Carby, “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood”, 88.

<sup>20</sup> On Cixous, see the introduction and Lauritis’s chapter in this volume. For a theoretical discussion of the strangeness and marginality of the “feminine” in postmodern discourse outside feminism, see Alice Jardine, *Gynesis*.

<sup>21</sup> I’m here evoking Alexander Doty’s reprise of dictionary definitions of “queer” in “There’s Something Queer Here” to exploit their destabilising potential. As well as being differentiated from simply “non-, anti-, or contrastraight” positions (73), it is worth noting that queer theory spells out what for some second-wave feminists was a liberating truism and for others a sign of dangerous relativism, namely that



tendency has been constant in feminist counterculture and is evident in many key metaphors for feminist interventions, such as Teresa de Lauretis' "view from elsewhere", which is revisited in *Differencing the Canon*. Griselda Pollock's formulation of "differencing" takes this metaphorical decentring one step further, by "deconstruct[ing] the oppositions inside/outside, norm/difference which ultimately condense on to the binary man/woman for which the others become related metaphors. The question is how to make a difference, by analysing this structuring of difference [...]".<sup>22</sup> Thanks to its constitutive marginality, feminism seems particularly well-suited for the continuous work of self-examination and self-critique; at the same time, however, it makes a particularly slippery subject for historiography, even for the writing of its own (hi)stories, since it is under an on-going process of redefinition that involves a constant self-decentring.

According to Pollock, feminist *art history* is an oxymoron, since "feminism is already posited as the difference", external to and excluded from the "inevitable logic" of the discipline.<sup>23</sup> Yet, as Pollock's work in art history—rather, towards the radicalisation of art history—demonstrates, this is an oxymoron worth grappling with: feminism in art history stands for the "strangeness, difference and violence" within the discipline of art history, which feminist art history exposes. This does not mean, however, that feminist art history is itself immune to creating its own strangeness and perpetrating its own acts of violence.

In a talk at the conference *347 minutes* held in conjunction with the Whitechapel exhibition *Live in your Head* (2000), a retrospective of conceptualism in Britain, Monica Ross pinpoints some instances of art historical violence:

We are considering art history today and yet .... We are and we are not... I have enjoyed "Live or *Live* in your head" immensely and yet ... there are [...] these distances ... these not enoughts, these invisible gaps between what is there and what is not there, the what that cannot be there of several works in the show and works which were there in the past but are not there in **this** [sic] present. So.. it's history and it isn't...<sup>24</sup>

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sexual identities—and, of course, sexual difference—do not pre-exist but are a *function* of representations.

<sup>22</sup> Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>24</sup> Ross, "History of Not".

Ross's talk focused on one of the omissions in that exhibition, namely the collaborative Women's Postal Art Event, a.k.a. *Feministo*, in which she participated.<sup>25</sup> *Feministo* consisted of postal exchange of small handcrafted objects between trained and untrained artists that were exhibited in travelling installations. The most prominent and best developed installation was *Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife* at the ICA in the summer of 1977, an uncanny mimicry of domestic space, including a kitchen and a bedroom, but also a memory room and a rape room. The Women's Postal Art Event was hailed at the time of its exhibition and shortly after as an inclusive and accessible antidote to daunting feminist conceptualism, or the alienating complexities of the engagement of some feminist artists with poststructuralist psychoanalysis. However, the recognition of its accessibility and its proximity to traditional women's crafts (crocheting, embroidery, etc.) had a less positive flipside: by implication, if not always explicitly, *Feministo* came to stand for a slightly ambivalent celebration of female culture that was affirmative but also problematic. "Mother art"<sup>26</sup> is subject to the limitations of any "form of self-contained subcultural resistance", edging on "the ghettoisation of women's art in an alternative tradition."<sup>27</sup> As I have suggested elsewhere, *Feministo* can and deserves to be (re)read as an incisive visual contribution to the feminist critique of domesticity, and particularly Luce Irigaray's explication of the metaphorical interconnections between dwelling and the feminine.<sup>28</sup> It also deserves a place in a retrospective of British conceptualism, as Ross argues. Crucially, nevertheless, these are not terms of interpretation which the work or its contributors invited, or in which it had ever been interpreted until very recently.

The omission of *Feministo* from *Live in Your Head* could only partly be explained as an example of patriarchal prejudice, still going strong within conceptualism. What is particularly challenging about the evocation of *Feministo* in Monica Ross's talk is that it brings up (and brings back) a division *within* feminist art history that pivots on the role

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<sup>25</sup> Along with Angela Amesbury, Penny Booth, Tricia Davis, Philippa Goodall, Pam Holt, Chick Hull, Kaye Lynch, Liz Musiatec, Kathy Nicholson, Su Richardson, Kate Walker, and many others.

<sup>26</sup> According to Mary Kelly's four-part division of feminist art practice: "mother art", "body art", "ego art", "'Other' art". Kelly, "On sexual politics and art" (1980), reprinted in Parker & Pollock, *Framing Feminism*, 303-312.

<sup>27</sup> Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman, "Textual strategies: The politics of art making", *ibid.*, 316.

<sup>28</sup> Kokoli, "Undoing 'homeliness' in feminist art: *Feministo: Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife* (1975-7)".

ascribed to critical theory in art practice. On the one side, there were projects like the Women's Postal Event, classified as celebratory, either seemingly untheorised or staunchly anti-theoretical art projects that aimed to be inclusive of non-professional artists (*Feministo* openly invited the participation of untrained amateurs through the feminist press), and/or fed off consciousness raising groups (as did *Feministo*), and/or privileged traditionally "feminine" skills, media and imagery. On the other side of the divide, there is theoretically informed conceptualist and postminimalist practice, that does not indulge or seduce the gaze, and which is often scriptovisual.

It has often been argued that this division between humanist and deconstructive feminist art practice is not only misleadingly schematic, but also retrospective, having only been articulated as such in the late eighties for the first time, although it does appear in a rudimentary form much earlier. For example, writing in 1980, Mary Kelly deploys a four-part classification of feminist art practice, as do Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman in an article published in *Screen* in the same year,<sup>29</sup> but they all (especially the latter two) operate along a binary opposition between feminist art that evokes and celebrates female culture and a practice that engages with existing artistic and philosophical traditions in their own terms (to a degree), to uncover and disrupt the semiotic production of "femininity". Interestingly, in both Kelly's, and Barry and Flitterman's texts, theory-based practice is discussed last, as the conclusion or culmination of their narrative. Although the division in question may not have been codified in the forms in which it later became familiar, it was not only operative but also often politically divisive within the movement. Following Mary Kelly's 1976 exhibition of the *Post-Partum Document* at the ICA and the publication of a thoughtful and positive review by Laura Mulvey in *Spare Rib*, a heated debate ensued in the correspondence pages of the same magazine, not only about the role of art in feminism, but also that of psychoanalytic theory in art.<sup>30</sup> Margot Waddell and Michelene Wandor argued that Mary Kelly's work ran the risk of provoking philistine dismissals that wouldn't be confined to that style of art practice or the theory with which it was in dialogue, but would extend to all feminist issues and threaten their political legitimacy.<sup>31</sup> In their response, Parveen Adams, Rosalind Delmar and Sue Lipshitz rightly pointed out

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<sup>29</sup> Barry and Flitterman, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making", reprinted in *Framing Feminism*, 313-321.

<sup>30</sup> Reprinted in *ibid.*, 203-205.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

that it is (also) by provoking such reactions that Kelly's work makes a statement.<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately, the division between "humanist" and "deconstructive" art practice does not stand up to critical scrutiny, especially with the benefit of historical distance. I would strongly contest the point that the kind of art practice that necessitated no prior knowledge of e.g. Lacanian psychoanalysis or poststructuralism on the part of the viewer is immanently untheorisable, i.e. averse to readings informed by abstract thought, let alone that it is obvious, in no need of interpretation or, crucially, reinterpretation thirty years on. My re-reading of *Feministo* was motivated by the wish to overcome the divide by showing its contingency. Yet pointing out, in retrospect, that the division is flawed does not mean that it has not been in operation and has not helped shape the field of feminist art.

Since the mid-eighties, the changing terrain of British visual culture has indeed rendered this division irrelevant for the time being, replacing it with others yet without actually resolving it. The practice of "women artists of colour",<sup>33</sup> such as Sonya Boyce, Sutapa Biswas, Lubaina Himid and Maud Sulter, as discussed very eloquently by themselves and art historians like Moira Roth, Jane Beckett and Gilane Tawadros, invented strategies of sublating the opposition between the postmodern condition of fragmentation and dissemination, and celebratory (or at least affirmative) representations of identity. Not only had certain formats and media gradually lost their exclusive association with particular aesthetic movements and discourses, but the theorisation and representation of diaspora, and the types of identification that it fostered, pre-empted the theoretical breakthroughs of postmodernism and deconstruction. As Stuart Hall put it, in an intriguing inversion of the centrifugal metaphors of the second wave, "now [...] that you all feel so dispersed, I become centred."<sup>34</sup> The intersection of race and gender as both a condition and prevalent concern of art practice acted as a conduit between strands that previously seemed irreconcilable if not incommensurable. The re-emergence of painting as a legitimate, no longer irretrievably tainted medium is typical of this radical reshuffling of the aesthetic and conceptual terrain of feminist art practice. As the subject positions, perspectives and practices that had until then been marginalised in the already marginal feminist movement slowly began to gain long-overdue

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>33</sup> These terms are of course themselves outdated—they are monuments to the exclusions that they targeted and, to a degree, overcome.

<sup>34</sup> Hall, "Minimal Selves", 45.

recognition, the dilemmas and divisions of the very recent past over the role of critical theory in art practice were themselves de-centred. For instance, the intense scepticism of visual pleasure that not only typified influential feminist analyses of cinema but also informed the avoidance of representing the female body in much feminist practice is no longer relevant. Biswas' use of photographic negatives in the installation *Infestations of the Aorta—Shrine to a Distant Relative* (1989) are indeed in dialogue with theoretical investigations into photography and myth, but in a distinctly visual way that engages the viewer irrespective of their familiarity with critical theory. In *Revenge*, a series of five paintings, Lubaina Himid sidesteps the law of the mother: "thou shalt not paint",<sup>35</sup> since it is through her appropriation of the medium of painting, and specifically the genre of history painting, that she invents the narratives that colonialism has censored and casts them in the highbrow aesthetic visual languages of the coloniser.<sup>36</sup> With photography thus employed in neither left-wing realist nor scriptovisual terms (in the style of e.g. Victor Burgin, Marie Yates, Yves Lomax) and the cultural meanings of painting negotiated and eroded from within, binaries that previously ruled no longer seem so instrumental. Such transitions—from the "displeasurable poetics" of theoretically engaged art to a politically inspired practice that has surpassed the choice between celebration and deconstruction—bear witness to the achievements of the artists involved in this moment of British art practice, and of the writers who revised the terms of analysis honed by second-wave feminism in response. These transitions, moreover, could not but be embedded in the history of feminist art historical publishing. In the next section, I will consider which "images of the past" are lost in the reshuffling, and in what shape they return.

### (Re)Framings

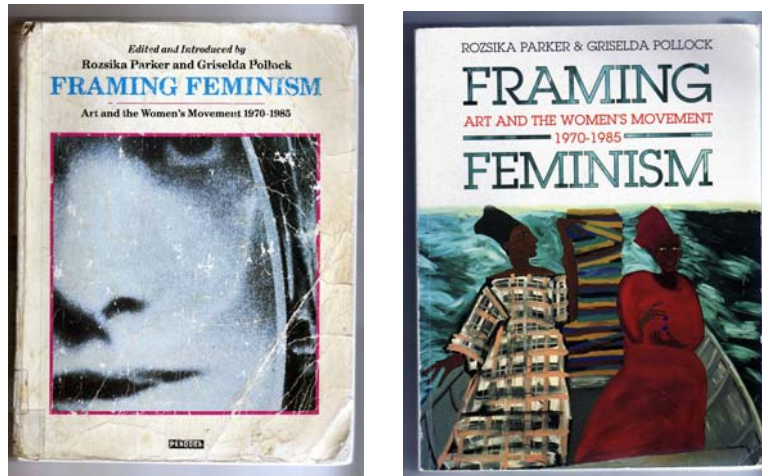
*Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement, 1970-1985*, edited by Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, is a valuable collection of documents from the transformative interventions of feminism in the visual arts in Britain. The volume opens with two lengthy introductory texts, a historical account of feminist action by both editors and a theoretical investigation into the meanings of "feminist art" by Pollock. The cover image of its first edition in 1987, seems, at first sight, to be a black and

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<sup>35</sup> Judith Mastai, "Thou Shalt Not... The Law of the Mother".

<sup>36</sup> I am here indebted to Griselda Pollock's reading of *Revenge* in *Differencing the Canon*, 169-198, to which this very brief summary does not do justice.

white photographic portrait of a white woman in grainy close-up, until it is identified as a panel from the section “Gaze” of *The Only Woman* (1985), a scriptovisual treatment of the stages of mourning according to Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) of a mother by her daughter.<sup>37</sup> The work, which was included in the landmark exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* (1985), is clearly situated in the deconstructive-theoretical side of the divide. Parker and Pollock end their informative introduction with a discussion of the exhibition *Difference*, for reasons of chronology but also because it appears to stand for the latest (then), most evolved stage in “the dialectic of strategic practices and the politics of a broadened Women’s Movement.”<sup>38</sup>



Figs. 9-1 and 9-2: The two covers of *Framing Feminism*. Reproduced by permission from HarperCollins Publishers.

Undated reprints of *Framing Feminism* replace the cover image with Himid’s 1991 painting *Between the Two My Heart is Balanced*, from the series *Revenge*. The new image falls outside the chronological limits of the collection, and clearly aims to address developments in feminism’s engagement with the visual arts *since* the first publication of the book. It must also be a response to the criticisms that *Framing Feminism* received

<sup>37</sup> For a detailed reading of the work, see Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 181-187.

<sup>38</sup> Parker and Pollock, “Fifteen Years of Feminist Action: From Practical Strategies to Strategic Practices”, *Framing Feminism*, 74.

for its limited coverage of women artists of colour, which does seem poor, with only two documents on shows by black artists, out of a total of fifty-eight anthologised documents. The editors' introductions devote more attention to such shows as well as to individual black women artists.<sup>39</sup> As time goes on, however, *Framing Feminism* acquires different meanings, which may not render such criticisms invalid or irrelevant, but which do shift the focus of interpretation: the editors' decision, for example, not to have the collected documents reset but to reproduce them photographically, exactly as they appeared in their original publication, gives the contemporary reader a glimpse of the print aesthetics of the time. The documents of *Framing Feminism* are not only about feminist art but also an example of feminist countercultural visual trends in publishing. *Framing Feminism* is second-wave feminist art, and its omissions or shortcomings are representative of the cultural circumstances from which it emerged.

The new cover of the reprint makes up for previous omissions, but also aims to break the "deafening silence" with which *Revenge* was often met in the 1990s, as Pollock notes. It offers itself as reparation, but also a new intervention in its current—then—cultural/racial/sexual politics. But unless we make the two covers and their significant distance into the object of investigation, what effect does this substitution have? An informal survey among artists and art historians with an interest in gender and/or feminism revealed that most had not given the new cover much thought. I wonder whether, however unwittingly, this new cover deflects from the now acknowledged Eurocentric bias of feminism in Britain in the seventies and eighties, which Carby took pains to point out. Does the cover suture this wound, or does it cover it up? The content of *Framing Feminism* remained unchanged in the reprint. It is not simply the presence of Himid's painting on the new cover that signifies, but the removal of Marie Yates' image from her scriptovisual installation *The Only Woman* has its own distinct meaning. What is the effect of its absence on the "not enoughs" that Monica Ross mentioned in reference to *Feministo*, and on the possibility of addressing and redressing them? By removing the reminder of a division which, albeit conceptually flawed, managed to favour some types of practice and disadvantage others, in terms of cultural visibility, access to institutions, academic attention, are we not in danger of missing the opportunity to actually redraft the stories of feminist art and artists, rather than simply deconstruct the principles that shaped existing narratives, while leaving such narratives largely untouched? Himid's

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 64-68.

painting speaks eloquently of the systemic exclusions of many stories of feminist art, including those told by *Framing Feminism*, but does not—and cannot—comment on the internal politics of these stories, precisely because it had been systemically excluded from them. The presence of *Between the Two My Heart is Balanced* on the cover repairs this exclusion—or rather acknowledges its existence and injustice: it’s a protest against and, simultaneously, a monument to uncomfortable truths.

The way in which the politically justified substitution of the cover of *Framing Feminism* papers over some important cracks is reminiscent of fetishism, in the sense (or some of the senses) in which it was deployed, at times with magnificent sharpness, by feminist theorists and practitioners. According to Laura Mulvey, whose engagement with the term is long-standing and well-documented, fetishism emerged as a key concept in left-wing politics and counter-aesthetics because it provided the “alchemical link” between Marx and Freud, the two main thinkers with whom the Left and, subsequently, feminism negotiated its analytical tools.<sup>40</sup> In both Marx and Freud, fetishism is called on to explain a blockage “or phobic inability” “in the social or sexual psyche”:<sup>41</sup> instances of fetishism are symptomatic of blindspots and thus, although and while they actually help preserve these blindspots, they also flag them as troubled and potentially vulnerable areas, where ideology is more likely to become unstuck.<sup>42</sup> For Marx, commodity fetishism bestows an apparently innate value on a commodity, while disavowing the real source of its value that is labour power. For Freud, sexual fetishism, a consequence of and coping strategy for castration anxiety, bestows the Mother with substitutes for the phallus that she lacks, thus disavowing her imaginary lack *and* sexual difference in one stroke. Feminism’s wary but productive dialogue with psychoanalysis in the work of Jane Gallop, Jacqueline Rose and Emily Apter demonstrates how the Freudian account of femininity amounts to the disavowal of sexual difference. First, the feminine sex is interpreted in reference to the male as a lack and, in fantasy, the result of punishment for the child’s desire to possess the maternal body, projected onto that body; however, the fear of castration has to be managed for desire to be sustainable (in anticipation of a more appropriate object) and, specifically, so that women can remain adequate love objects and male heterosexuality

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<sup>40</sup> Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 1. On the different sources and associations of fetishism in the 1970s, see also Mulvey, “Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture”.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Mulvey explains that fetishes are “always haunted by the fragility of the mechanisms that sustain [them]”, *ibid.*, 8.



can be protected. Secondly (and consequently), in Freudian theory according to feminist readings, there is a single proper—whole—sex and that is male:<sup>43</sup> thus sexual difference itself is disavowed. Disavowal privileges belief over knowledge, notes Mulvey,<sup>44</sup> and, I would add, assimilation over differences, let alone differencing.

In the 1970s, Mulvey did not only work towards the theorisation of fetishism but also, in her films, against it. In avant-garde art practice, the dismantling of the double fetishism on which viewing pleasure relied was at the top of the agenda: sexual fetishism, which made the woman on screen into an object of scopophilic contemplation, suturing patriarchy's fear and loathing of women off screen; and commodity fetishism, which fudged the creation of the realist narrative illusion of mainstream film through the ideological function of the medium.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* set off to interrogate the possibility of the woman fetishist who, in Freudian terms would be an aberration, if not an impossibility. The work acts out the trauma of psychoanalytic motherhood but also embodies an instance of its reparation, in and beyond the field of psychoanalytic theory. In the *PPD*, Kelly documents the preordained separation of the—male—child from the mother through a combination of meticulous collection and detailed production of documentation in six parts, ranging from analysed faecal stains and feeding charts (Documentation I) to the child's first attempts to form letters, accompanied by the mother's diary and exergue (VI). In collecting and manufacturing this material, and, significantly, making it into a work of art, Kelly attempts to investigate the possibility for a female and specifically maternal fetishism. For the mother, having a child is in a sense equal to acquiring the Phallus, and thus postpones the acknowledgement of (her) lack. Like the male (archetypical) fetishist, who is aware of and yet disavows the fact that mother is already castrated, the female/maternal fetishist disavows the loss of the symbolic plenitude that was for her embodied in the child, as he/she overcomes (through repression) the Oedipal complex. For the mother, the loss of the child is disavowed

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<sup>43</sup> Hence the punning title of Irigaray's *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* [*This Sex Which is not One*]: the female sex is not one but multiple, not monistic but innately plural; and it isn't really a sex at all, in so far as it refuses to play the symmetrical "other" to the male.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>45</sup> As well as her landmark essays "Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious", 6-13, and "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 14-26, see also "Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde", 111-126, all reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures*. The latter two elaborate on the mutual implication of sexual and commodity fetishism.

through the fetishisation of the child him-/herself (or sometimes simply of “child”), by dressing him/her up, having another baby, etc. Kelly boldly (and, I think, playfully) casts the collection of memorabilia for the mother fetishist as an equivalent to pornography for the male fetishist: first shoes, school reports and drawings become for the mother, in Lacanian terms, *emblems* of desire.<sup>46</sup> For the artist/mother, however, the loss of the child may also be made up for by the art object, or the making of the art work, as a process and an intervention in space.<sup>47</sup> Finally, fetishism appears to be the litmus test for categorisation in the taxonomies of feminist art. According to Kelly’s four-part classification, “mother art” fetishises, while “‘Other’ art” thematises, analyses and ultimately challenges the workings of fetishism.

Writing in 1995, Janet Wolff turns to the division between so-called humanism and so-called deconstruction in feminist art history, to discover that it continuously returns under different guises: as scripto-visual work vs. painting; theory vs. experience; elitism vs. accessibility; and even UK vs. America, which is the guise it assumed in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, the last of three collections of feminist art historical writing edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard. Divisions survive fetishistic glosses and can only get worked through by curiosity, Mulvey’s antidote to fetishism. Both curiosity and courage are required at present, when “the relation between representation and historical events becomes increasingly dislocated”.<sup>48</sup> The “not enoughs” of feminist art history are not merely the traces of past divisions, but left unexamined, they can also become the supports for present and future misreadings, or worse, failures to read. Addressing and redressing the “not enoughs” is virtually a matter of life and death: to paraphrase Pollock, in the persistently sexist and racist context of contemporary culture, a failure to read the hidden fissures in the stories of feminist art is cultural murder.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, xix-xx. *PPD* was originally an installation work, which was first published in book form in 1983, five years after the exhibition of its final instalment. Kelly addresses the implications of this transition (from installation to book) in her preface, xx-xxi.

<sup>47</sup> Mulvey, “*Post-Partum Document* Review”, originally published in *Spare Rib*, no. 40 (1976), reprinted *ibid.*, 202.

<sup>48</sup> *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 189.

## Coda: Returns

At the beginning of *Differencing the Canon*, Pollock outlines the three main feminist positions on the question—or rather the problem—of the canon, in an evolutionary schema: the first aims to expand it “so that it will include what it hitherto refused—women, for instance, and minority cultures”;<sup>50</sup> the second sees it as “a structure of subordination and domination which marginalises women”;<sup>51</sup> while the third treats it as “a discursive strategy in the production and reproduction of sexual difference”.<sup>52</sup> The first model, deemed in danger of ghettoisation, is illustrated by Faith Ringgold’s *Dancing in the Louvre*, the first instalment in *The French Collection*, a series of quilted paintings accompanied by text. The third is implicitly represented by Himid’s oeuvre, among others.

Another reading of Ringgold’s work is possible, one that does not contrast it unfavourably to Himid’s practice, but foregrounds their significant similarities.<sup>53</sup> *The French Collection* is an investigation into the colour and sex of the Parisian art scene at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. from the point of view of the excluded.<sup>54</sup> It is the result of substantial research into the racial and sexual politics of European art, framed as the autobiographical narrative of a fictional character (who is arguably also the artist’s alter ego), Willia Marie Simone, who travelled from Atlanta, Georgia, to Paris to be an artist. Instead, Willia Marie finds herself getting married immediately upon arrival (tries to escape but soon has children), is simultaneously delighted and frustrated by her encounters with the modernist masters for whom she models out of necessity, manages her husband’s *café* after his death, and occasionally does some painting as well. *The French Collection* pays homage to historical figures through portraits, including writers and artists, political activists and feminist intellectuals, but also highlights the paucity (or rather the suppression) of a female African American heritage. The driving question behind the series is: how can one be a serious artist in the absence of a tradition that recognises her as one? Or, more pertinently: how can one be an artist when she has historically been misrecognised, ignored or misconstrued as anything but? Very pretty, but primitive; valued as a model for the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>53</sup> *Dancing in the Louvre* is evoked again to offset Himid’s attitude towards hegemonic historical narratives, *Differencing the Canon*, 188.

<sup>54</sup> The texts of the story quilts are reprinted in Dan Cameron et al., *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold’s French Collection and Other Story Quilts*.

European primitivist/modernist master, but not as an artist in her own right. Thus, *The French Collection* simultaneously gives a historical and critical account of exclusion and undertakes the work of reparation in fiction and in visual representation. In her interpretation of another quilt from the *French Collection*, *Picasso's Studio*, Ann Gibson comments on the self-reflexivity of the series: it is *about* the canon of European Modernism, while simultaneously “rewriting” it: to borrow Pollock’s incisive phrase from her discussion of Himid, Ringgold’s quilted canvases strike their difference within the canon by the representation of Willia Marie, a young black woman artist, as a great Modernist mistress.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Differencing the Canon*, 182. The compromised character of the designation “mistress”, discussed at length in Parker and Pollock’s influential study *Old Mistresses*, is wholly intended and, I think, appropriate: to call Willia Marie a Modernist master would erase the gender and racial discrimination she is shown to face in the scriptovisual narrative of *The French Collection*.

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