

Beyond Post-Feminism

The Work of Laura Mulvey and Griselda Pollock

BY MONIKA GAGNON

It cannot be easy to move from oppression and its mythologies to resistance in history.

— Laura Mulvey

There are many affinities between *Visual and Other Pleasures* by Laura Mulvey, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Art History* by Griselda Pollock, and *Framing Feminism*, edited by Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker. In their own ways, each references the history of feminist cultural practices in Britain since the early 1970s. Both Mulvey and Pollock have made seminal contributions to critical feminist thought and have delimited the hazards of an “unthreatening” absorption of feminism and the consequent diffusion of feminism’s political effectiveness in the increasingly conservative climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In *Vision and Difference*, Pollock underlines the importance of her political roots, making explicit its constructive effects on the specificity of a feminist criticism:

There are significant continuities between feminist art practice and feminist art history, for those dividing walls which normally segregate artmaking from art criticism and art history are eroded by the larger community to which we belong as feminists, the women’s movement. We are our own conversational community developing our paradigms of practice in constant interaction and supportive commentary. The political point of feminist art history must be to change the present by means of how we re-represent the past (p. 14).

Such a “re-representation” of the past is precisely what *Framing Feminism* achieves. As a collaborative project between Pollock and Roszika Parker (author of *The Subversive Stitch*), it follows by some four years, their rigorous analysis of women’s exclusion from dominant art history, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. In the earlier book, Parker and Pollock systematically trace the ways in which work by women artists has been discursively feminized by art history, the consequence being that women’s work has been marginalized by the reinforcement of divisions between high art (painting and sculpture, for instance), and the decorative arts and crafts. They describe the propagation

of this symbolic division as symptomatic of the marginalization of women in the larger social sphere. *Framing Feminism* differs from the analytical treatise that *Old Mistresses* is, providing a model of one of the many necessary components for constructing feminist art histories: simply amassing documentation and information that remains largely uncompiled and disparate, and therefore frequently “non-existent.”

The bulk of this 400-page book consists of facsimiles from original magazines and journals, articles, reviews, issue debates, letters to the editor, exhibition announcements and accompanying reproductions of women’s work, all organized under four categories: Images and Signs; Institutions; Exhibitions; and the more analytically focused chapter, Strategies of Feminism. Introduced with two substantial essays by Pollock and Parker that narratively trace the events to which the documentation belongs, *Framing Feminism* is a valuable resource, guide and historical anthology of British feminist work. Implicitly as well, however, it also functions as a reminder of how effectively women’s and, more specifically, feminist work in the visual arts, has been excluded from dominant histories of culture, thereby underscoring the need for a constant critical reformulation of strategies.

While *Framing Feminism* is exemplary of a necessary component to constructing feminist histories — the task of “keeping the records” — Pollock and Mulvey’s books embody different contributions to critical feminist cultural projects: one is art historically based, the other located in contemporary cultural theory debates.

In *Vision and Difference*, a collection of essays written since 1980, Pollock uses a rigorous academic approach, systematically outlining in the first two of her six essays, the necessary steps and critical strategies for feminism to “change what is studied in art history... how it is studied and taught.” Effectively drawing upon Marxist cultural theory, Pollock warns that feminist art history must be “wary of reproducing its errors,” namely,

treating art as a reflection of the society that produced it, or as

an image of its class divisions; treating an artist as a representative of his/her class; economic reductionism, that is, reducing all arguments about the forms and functions of cultural objects back to economic or material causes; ideological generalization, placing a picture because of its obvious content into a category of ideas, beliefs or social theories of a given society or period (pp. 27-28).

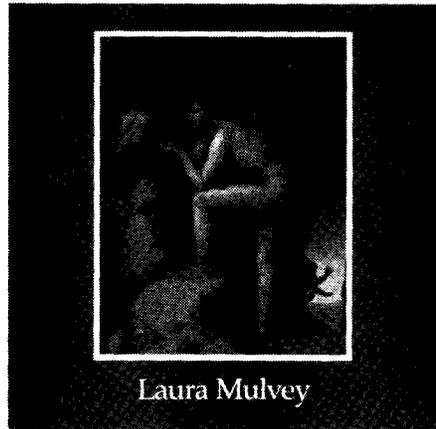
Pollock provides a structure for future projects in feminist art historical scholarship by repeatedly raising essential questions, and posing the crucial issues and problems facing the building of feminist history. In her subsequent three essays, Pollock proceeds to contribute to what she and Parker had in 1981 outlined as feminist art history's double project: "the historical recovery of data about women producers of art," simultaneous with a "deconstruction of the discourses and practices of art history itself."

"Visible discrimination is merely the exposed nerve," Pollock writes in "Vision, Voice and Power," with the surgical precision she often applies to her scrutiny of art history. While it is imperative to underscore the importance of this 1982 essay to the formation of a very broad feminist body of thought in art history, her rigour comes at a cost. Many historically significant feminist works are coolly dismantled and their usefulness to the current political moment calmly (if accurately) dismissed in the name of academic rigour. This is not to suggest that feminist work must remain unconditionally outside the scope of criticism—but that important contributions to the formation of a feminist body of thought, however contradictory, be valued and recognized as intrinsic to the historical process.

Pollock's approach to contemporary feminist history in "Vision, Voice and Power," lacks the historical, socio-cultural specificities she so carefully maps in her later essays. It is painful to see Linda Nochlin's path-breaking 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" submitted to Pollock's exacting criticism. As a student of art history and women's studies in 1980, Nochlin's essay gave me the opportunity to consider criticizing an art history where there were no women artists. Is this personal nostalgia at the expense of critical rigour? Or is it just an admission of the subjective stakes implied in our varied contributions to the building of feminist cultures? Pollock herself describes Nochlin's essay as "one of the first and influential essays which initiated the renewed efforts of feminists in art history in Britain and America (p. 34)," no small place in history. Yet this does not spare it from being described as "liberal, equal rights feminism in which discrimination against women is admitted to have taken place *but, at the gates of a future freedom*, issues of sexual identity and social gender evaporate before the dream of bourgeois humanism (p. 35, my emphasis)."

The critical zeal with which Pollock moves through so many art history contributions makes her virtual embrace of a handful of contemporary of British artists' work seem questionable in "Screening the Seventies." This is not to question the value of the

Visual and Other Pleasures



Laura Mulvey

work of the artists she discusses (among them, Mary Kelly, Marie Yates, Yve Lomax), but rather to require of Pollock the exacting critical precision that she demands of other feminist cultural producers. Or rather, to be wary of the dangers of prescriptive criticism, one that attempts to exemplify what a correct and comprehensive practice should be, an idealized practice confined by static models of power and gender relations. The frequently didactic tone of Pollock's approach, so effective when dealing with her historical material, may undermine the many contributions of contemporary feminist criticisms by not acknowledging the significance of location, positioning and the articulation of an always subjective voice and language that has been in discussion by feminists since the mid-1970s.

While Pollock's book tackles the difficult task of examining and reconstructing history, Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures* takes a wide range of cultural products — art, film and popular culture — as objects for critical analysis, despite Mulvey's renown for her work in film and film theory. Organized in five sections — Iconoclasm, Melodrama, On the Margins, Avant-Garde and Boundaries — Mulvey's writing, spanning some 17 years, is simultaneously systematic, clear and poetic, elegantly and eloquently integrating theory to critically engage contemporary issues and events. The 15 essays in the collection represent a range of topics for a critical feminist sensibility — including discussions of an intervention at a Miss World beauty contest, the British miners' strike of the mid-1980s, and various art exhibitions and films. Her seminal 1973 essay on the "masculinization" of the spectator in classical Hollywood cinema, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," is included, as are five of the essays on cinema. Her essay on Allen Jones is accompanied by four others that focus specifically on artists' works: a catalogue essay, "Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti" (co-written with Peter Wollen), which accompanied a large travelling exhibit; an essay on the 1985 group exhibition of five photographic artists, "Magnificent Obsession"; another on Barbara Kruger and Victor Burgin's works; and finally on Mary Kelly's "Corpus." This range of topics provide Mulvey with a springboard to consider complex cultural and social formations and phenomena.

Although Pollock's critical assessments of feminist history seem at times to ignore the significance of time and site-specific strategies in feminist practices, Mulvey presents this issue as central to political effectivity. Mulvey's sense of history in the production of her own critical writing, as well as her sense of context, are acutely developed and personal inflections are sprinkled throughout the essays (each is prefaced by a description of the original publication/presentation date and place). This is particularly evident in "Changes: Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience," which along with the introduction, serve as virtual retrospective histories of Mulvey's writing and film-making practice with their emphases on the sources and development of intellectual ideas that make up her body of work. What emerges

is a remarkable range of references from classical mythology and economics to literary theory and feminist psychoanalytic theory, including discussions of Juliet Mitchell, Shoshana Felman and Julia Kristeva.

For Mulvey, psychoanalytic theory provides an essential conceptual tool for understanding women's symbolic position within culture. "Psychoanalytic theory," writes Mulvey in her introduction, "opened up the possibility of understanding the mechanics of popular mythology and its raw materials: images of sexual difference, instincts and their vicissitudes, primal fantasy."

Both the idealized art history based, prescriptive tone of Pollock's analyses and Mulvey's more ambivalent, exploratory engagements with products of contemporary culture are essential to the building of feminist cultures. For if in Pollock's art historical world we find useful tools and models for critical analyses and strategies, Mulvey's self-reflexive, expansive approach may be understood as embodying the contradictions that mark the complexities of our histories and cultures, underlining therein the necessary flexibility and adaptability of our interventions.

By way of a conclusion, I want to broadly outline what I consider to be some of the specific areas of concern facing Canadian feminist cultural producers and critics. In its historical position of representing an excluded and marginalized group (culturally, economically and symbolically), feminism, very generally, has a strategic contribution to make to the analyses of empire and colony, a debate which has particular relevance for Canada, in the context of its historical attempts to assert a political cultural identity. With recent government policy threatening Canadian cultural production and distribution, and a fiscal budget designed to reduce federal support to women's organizations and their attendant cultural activities (another hard-hit group being, predictably enough, Native communities), we must consider the conditions facing Canadian women artists as one of a continuing double oppression: as the oppressed sex in a patriarchal culture haunted by a history of colonization, one that begins with the French and the British and continues today with American dominance both culturally and economically.

One of the strengths of feminism is that it can be an international discourse, one that recklessly ignores geographical boundaries and can expose the concept of nationalism as an imperializing discourse. Yet as Canadians, we must be sensitive to the geographical realities of our far-flung communities, for these realities seriously challenge any possibility of a boundless discourse for Canadian feminists. How can we reconcile the inevitable generalities that arise from this vast territory with concerns that are localized and specific to particular communities of cultural producers?

In spite of the subversive intents of some feminist artists, the invisibility of subcultural art activities and the liberal appropriation of oppositional practices by the mainstream art world attest to the ability of the dominant culture to renew itself by recouping or con-

taining transgressive work. Given the historical reality that has characterized the radicality of the avant garde, how must feminist artists conceptualize artistic strategies? And considering the geographical realities that I've outlined, can we refer to any cohesive notion of Canadian feminist practice?

Pollock's assertion of the consequences of the "unthreatening, additive" effect of feminism foresees the potential ineffectiveness of feminist politics, with its gradual absorption as analytical methodology rather than a practice with subversive intents. The increasing insistence in the popular media that we have entered a post-feminist period suggests a static notion of feminism as well as an optimistic, perhaps utopic social moment that is somehow beyond patriarchy. We know this not to be so.

As a critic located in Toronto, my understanding of the increasing visibility of woman artists in Toronto and Montreal is that it is critically double-edged. This visibility is the perceptible effect of the insistence on affirmative action for women artists throughout the 1970s, among other factors, including the increased sophistication and conditional respectability of an often anodyne analytical feminist methodology within some institutions. If under the guise of affirmative action we must support this visibility of women, so too we must mourn the cost of this praise, as many of these artists dissociate themselves from a specifically feminist politics they feel will function against them and their work within the institutional spaces of the gallery, the museum and the marketplace. We must also ask what effect the absence of politics in regions where women artists are increasingly exhibited has, if any, on those feminist cultural producers residing in regions where conditions of practice continue to demand more didactic political positions.

In many ways, the current phenomena of shedding feminism highlights the importance of Pollock's work in analyzing the institutional workings of gender relations within art history, the naturalizing of particular relations and the camouflaging of power. It makes clear as well, the significance of Mulvey's work: embracing the implicit relations between a range of cultural products and representations, and insisting upon a critical politics at every moment. Just as we are not beyond patriarchy, neither can we afford to make claims of being post-feminist. As Mulvey

writes, feminism must "constantly theorize the relation between political aspiration and social change and stay one step, at least, ahead of the game."

Laura Mulvey. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock. *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, eds. *Framing Feminism*. London: Pandora Press, 1987.

Griselda Pollock. *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.

