

PERSONA Launch 16 January

## **A Motivated History**

What do I mean - matters to me as an art historian and also part of feminism as a political project - ie looking to change the present and build a better future

1. The informing idea is that history isn't a fixed thing -
  - a. as has been clearly pointed out by the so called New Historicism, ie this isn't my original idea - it has always been written from the perspective and to serve the needs of the present.
  - b. Walter Benjamin has called it 'the history of the victors' -
  - c. our immediate cultural history of Modernist art and design has clearly been made in the male mould - dominated by male voices and perceptions.
  - d. thru Benjamin's insight - exposing the usually naturalised workings of history, he also gives hope - if those workings are understood they can be wrestled from the victors and history made differently - to serve our needs - the need of women artists

## 2. WHY IT MATTERS : **Clearly important for the feminist project -**

- a. it affects our present - how we see ourselves how we can imagine what and who we can 'be', the cultural spaces we feel entitled to....and I think this sense of 'entitlement' is a key one for women in all arenas and no less so in the arts - the PERSONA we can occupy with confidence

I draw on various theorists to bring out a wider/deeper significance

### A. IRAGARAY the french philosopher

- a. has drawn attention to the desperately damaging effects of our (male) 'monoculture' in which women are 'unrealised' and men cut off from relationality (in her term 'unblossomed')
- b. and promotes the necessity for a female subjectivity to be identified and cultivated in order 'to reach a more just and fulfilled culture'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Luce Irigaray Key Writings* ed Luce Irigaray, . Continuum, London and New York, 2004. p. viii and x. Not to put too fine a point on it, she goes on to assert "Working for the liberation or construction of a feminine subjectivity and a culture of two subjects, we are really working towards the liberation of humanity itself, towards another time of our becoming as humans". (xv)

- c. What that subjectivity might be, how to cultivate it, can seem impossibly difficult and slippery, but surely a *truly* avant-gardist task appropriate to fine art.
- d. Hilary Robinson, in *Reading Art Reading Irigaray*, exploring the role of fine art practice and criticism, identifies, in Irigaray's writing, two necessary elements: the development of a syntax appropriate to a female morphology (or bodily form) which I won't be pursuing now - and the establishment of **woman-to-woman genealogies**, 'that create the possible space for a 'becoming' as women',<sup>2</sup>

e.

b.

Conventionally a **genealogy** is a line traced through the proper name, the name of the father, from which women in their own right disappear (an ongoing prob for historians).

Elizabeth GROSZ, in *Sexual Subversions*, reflecting on the contribution of Irigaray and other feminist philosophers, Elizabeth Grosz offers a very different definition

*A genealogy maps the interconnections between the production of knowledges, bodies and powers. It is thus a motivated history, a history of the 'birth' and transformation of contemporary institutions, practices and procedures.* <sup>3</sup>

We can map different interconnections, bring into view different woman-to-woman trajectories/genealogies to build that sense of entitlement - a 'becoming as women'

A woman to woman genealogy of artists....

Where ever you look you will find women artists, practicing, producing art against the odds as it were -

more recently, since the late 19th into the 20thC and up to the present, a significant body of women's art work has been made - creating a 'heritage' if you like.

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson 2006 *Reading Art Reading Irigaray* I.B. Taurus, p.151

<sup>3</sup> GROSZ Elizabeth *Sexual Subversions* Allen and Unwin 1989. xviii

In the last 10 years or so it's becoming more and more available to us in important institutional forms - through the work of feminist curators, drawing on feminist art history - eg exhibits like *elles@ pomp* (Elizabeth Sackler centre for women's art WACK! those blockbuster feminist exhibits) building a sense of 'entitlement'

#### 4. MY EXAMPLES -

- i. Boty and women Pop artists - has been my recent research and publication
- ii. Boty/Olowska -
- iii. Olowska lead me to Berlin where she was exhibiting work in 2008
  1. number of sites - including Neu Nat Gall Mies v d Rohe - range of artists - men and women responding
  2. drawn to 3 women who were making work that related to women artists or designers active in the first half of the 20th C
- a. Paulina Olowska b. 1976 and **Zofia Stryenska** 1891-1974 (famous in own time, Paris 25). reproduced in bl and wh - struggled with the spaces = overwhelmed
- b. **Nairy Baghramian b. 1971** and Janette Laverriere 1909-11
  - a. schinkel - opened the bienial Louis Michell
  - b. Baghramian in NNatGal
- c. Susanne Winterling, b. 1970 (Germany) responding to the work of Eileen Gray 1878-1976 *A Jewell in Troubled Water*
- d. Olowska and Stryenska at the Schinkel gallery
- e. "a creative dialogue, that combines our own personal experience and practice with the idea of having another artist as a metaphor for our struggles now, it's not an homage because it is not nostalgic, more active and radical, the idea of a companion that shares our experiences"

**These eggs all with Modernist practitioners - but there are many other eggs not going so far back - one, not in the article that I'd like to mention is**

*Once More with Feeling* (WAL and art history)

Organised by Oriana Fox - won a bursary from the Women's Art Library (see the role of institutions again)

***My role will be researcher, writer, performer and curator in that I plan to literally connect contemporary practitioners with bodies of work which can inform new performance hybrids involving re-enactment and/or appropriation.***

- among many other recreations - hilarious cock and cunt - Judy Chicago women's house 1972
- also explored the ambiguity that a current generation can feel about second wave overtly feminist practice Fox and Hannah Wilke's SOS

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5. A working title at one point was '*here's looking at you*'

6. In dialogue with other essays in the journal - ties in with editorial about ***mirroring***

a.

***a. embarrassment*** is a theme that comes out - especially in essays by Daria Martin and Eva Kenny - I see as the other side of the coin of entitlement (when you don't know where to look)

b. Condorelli and Gordon look to ***Friendship*** (the 'company we keep' both literally and if you like historically - the things we read the ideas we feel sympathy for. And also reflect on how women and slaves have been excluded from classical concepts of friendship as they were not free - so what kind of friendships can and do women make?)

c. Others turn to precursors

a. Ilsa Leaver-Yap writing on Virginia Woolf and the Hogarth Press

b. Nadia Hebsin on Winifred Knights

Bringing me back to the importance of a ***motivated history***

and a collaboration between, an interweaving of the practices of artists with feminist historians and curators.

BATTERSBY

In *Gender and Genius* Christine Battersby offers a historical understanding of the predicament of women artists, when she sees them as not just 'outside tradition', but as actually *structuring the spaces* between the "bold lines" picked out by conventional art historians and commentators. It is only now, she argues, "after a lengthy period of sustained effort by feminist historians and critics, that are we at last learning to see the *depth of those spaces*".<sup>4</sup>

And work within them - perhaps the opportunity to set up such a dialogue - in the way Melissa has organised group discussions in different cities....

## POLLOCK

the vitality of a feminist analysis in art and culture [is] in its doubled movement as historical retrospect and a constant projection of feminism as a poeisis to

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<sup>4</sup> Battersby, Christine, 1989 *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*. London: The Women's Press, p.152.

come, a becoming, for which we have in the last thirty years barely made a start.<sup>5</sup>

end on really inspiring note - a heritage plus a collaboration - make a motivated history that is already leading to *transformation of contemporary institutions, practices and procedures.*

Exploring those depths, to develop a feminist aesthetics will take more, she argues, than just slotting women artists into existing histories. They must be positioned

*“...in two different, but overlapping patterns: the matrilineal and patrilineal line of influence and response that swirl through (and across) the intricate network of relationships out of which we shape our past.*

Crucially, though,

*to understand what the woman artist is doing, and the merits or demerits of her work, she will have to be located in a separate female pattern that, so to speak, runs through the [male pattern] in a kind of contrapuntal way.”*

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<sup>5</sup> Pollock, 2008, p.277.