Women Artists and the Limits of Modernist Art History
Dorothy Rowe

Women Artists and Modernism edited by Katy Deepwell, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998, 206 pp., 39 b. & w. illus., £45.00 hdbk, £15.99 pbk

We Weren’t Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism by Marsha Meskimmon, London: I.B. Tauris, 1999, 263 pp., 33 b. & w. illus., £35.00 hdbk, £14.95 pbk

Projektionen: Rassismus und Sexismus in der Visuellen Kultur edited by Annegret Friedrich, Birgit Haehnel, Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff and Christina Threuter, Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1997, 263 pp., 98 b. & w. illus., DM 38,00 hdbk


The dismantling of western binary thought within the constructed histories of modernism is a continuous and on-going project which, as all of the books under review demonstrate, leads to a richer and more nuanced reading of modernist art practice than has been foregrounded by previous dominant constructs of masculinized critical interpretation and history. One of the key results of such dismantling is not only the recovery of lost histories of women practitioners but also crucially revolves around the total refiguring of critical and interpretive strategies in which the instability and embodied subjectivity of both artist and critic are recognized as providing tools with which completely to rethink critical practice. All the books listed here engage in such reconceptualization to different degrees and all of them utilize art practice by women as a lever towards such resituated thinking. The two German volumes, Projections: Racism and Sexism in Visual Culture and Myths of Authorship in the 20th Century, are both the result of research undertaken by German feminist art historians through a series of conferences held at the Universities of Trier and Tübingen between 1995 and 1996. Projections is divided into sections on changing perspectives, space and borders, stereotypes, bodies and women artists. It is through such broad-brush themes that closer readings of individual case studies are made. The essays, by seventeen different contributors, range from the historical to the contemporary and are unified by their common theme of post-colonial explorations of the construction of ‘the other’ within western art practice. The confrontation with their own colonial past has been a long time coming within the discipline of German art history and this volume is not a disappointment. A key theme throughout the text is one of mapping new subjectivities within the discursive framework of post-colonial feminist politics. Topics considered within the text include theoretical essays regarding the construction of sexuality and race, and visual deconstructions of images by Delacroix, Ingres, Man Ray, Picasso, Rembrandt, Blake, Rubens, Liz Crossley, Maud Sulter and Lubaina Himid, amongst others.
Myths of Authorship is similarly divided into themed sections containing essays by a number of different contributors and it acts as a companion volume in terms of the methodological approaches taken by its authors. The five themes within this volume are: constructions of gender and authorship; authorship and women artists in the avant garde; women artists in conflict with myths of the artist; mythologies of the artist and national identity; and, finally, a reproduction of some of the images included in the exhibition Myths of authorship and femininity, which took place in Tübingen during the period of the conference. Again, the main themes allow the twenty-four participants to undertake close readings of particular instances of mythologized authorship from a feminist perspective. Considerations of masculinity are integral to many of the chosen examples and the volume offers the reader an array of readings ranging from early modernism to contemporary practice. One of the aims of the associated exhibition was to resituate interpretations of works held in the graphic collection of the Art Historical Institute and Library of the University of Tübingen in dialogue with contemporary feminist art practice. Indeed, the editors’ stated intentions were not to let the graphic works ‘speak for themselves’ but rather to host a display that would generate discussion and debate (p. 286). The theme of the conference led them to re-read many of the older works by placing them ‘in conversation’ with works by contemporary feminist practitioners whose projects have involved irony and wit as part of their strategies in the manipulation and explosion of authorial mythologies. The conclusion of the text with a curatorial intervention is a particularly welcome aspect of a volume that is a self-conscious attempt to renegotiate and reintegrate models of art-historical research with feminist art practice.

Katy Deepwell’s edited volume on Women artists and modernism is a similar anthology to those cited. As with all the books under review, it represents a diversity of theoretically sophisticated interventions into traditionally dominant and mainly masculinized paradigms of modernity and modernism. The eleven essays included in Deepwell’s text offer specific case studies that disrupt the dominant discursive frameworks with which they engage. Rosemary Betterton opens the volume with a work that continues her interest in images by Käthe Kollwitz. Working on the premise that received histories of modernism construct false divisions between public and private spheres of gendered experience, Betterton demonstrates that the politicized interaction between public and private was successfully mediated through the represented bodies of women and children in Kollwitz’s work on the fate of the oppressed working classes, particularly in her graphic series, such as The Weaver’s Revolt (1898). Betterton also explores the fragile subject position negotiated by Kollwitz in her own self-portraiture, particularly in the face of the masculinized politics of modernism. Set against this is a study of the way in which other socially committed and politically active women artists sought alternative strategies for negotiating their own gender positions in visual representation at the turn of the century in both Britain and Germany. One of the strategies that Betterton retrieves is the use made by female artists active during this era of a spiritual and symbolic rhetoric of image-making. The retrieval of such a strategy for consideration is fraught with difficulties that Betterton carefully articulates, especially as it is a strategy that has been swept under the carpet of historical interpretation. One way that she re-situates a reading of spiritual and symbolic iconography in work by women artists which avoids essentialism is to read it through an analysis of Kristeva’s theories of ‘Women’s Time’, in which cyclical monumental time is favoured over linear time as a model for female subjectivity. The privileging of the monumental over the socio-historical in women’s art practice could be read as a recognition of the limits of socialist realist discourse for some women artists of this era because such discourse was still heavily masculinized.

Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry’s essay continues the investigation into modernist spaces of representation and women artists’ interventions into the dominant paradigms of
modernist practice through a reading of the works of four women artists engaged in various
ways with Vorticism in Britain. Of particular interest are the theoretical frameworks that
the authors employ in order to discuss the gendered mapping of early modern London and
the place of the embodied subjectivity of the female artist within it. A particularly evocative
strategy is their use of Virginia Woolf’s 1930 essay ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’,
which provides a vocabulary with which to discuss the issues involved in reconceptualizing
female subjectivity and representations of urban space. Pauline de Souza’s continuing work
on theories of representation and gender in the work of black artists is also given space in
this volume through de Souza’s consideration of the ways in which conflicts of gender,
sexuality and racial identity were played out in images produced by Afro-American artists
of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s. In a theoretically sophisticated and complex
series of moves, de Souza deconstructs the mythologies inherent in debates regarding black
identity that were circulating during the era and reads them against different images of the
‘new negro’ that were also being constructed at the time. Her conclusions point to the
problematic issue of black male attempts to construct theories of black identity, attempts
that often relied upon the suppression of black female sexuality as potentially dangerous,
primitivizing influences that could lead to social decay.

Other strands of theoretical inquiry within the volume include those essays which
engage with issues of women artists’ and critics’ public and private identities as practising
professionals in the public sphere (such as Bridget Elliott on Romaine Brooks and ‘Gluck’,
Susan Platt on Elizabeth McCausland, Joanna Frueh on Margarett Sargent and Renée
Baert on ‘Desiring daughters’) and those essays that consider the nature of critical
constructions of women artists’ identities that have often led to their suppression and
omission from canonical structures of art history and criticism (Katy Deepwell on
Hepworth, Nedira Yakir on women artists of the St Ives group). A particularly lively
exegesis on tradition and authority within modernist art practice can be found in Moira
Roth’s fictional exchange with Marcel Duchamp. Roth describes her text (which is a
transcription of a live performance) as ‘talking back’ with all the associated meanings of
‘speaking as an equal to an authority figure’ or ‘daring to disagree’ (p. 130). Roth
incisively and wittily dislocates Duchamp’s continuing stranglehold over contemporary
art practice and theory whilst also self-consciously locating her own complicity in the
perpetuation of Duchampian mythology in some of her early work. Her project now,
though, is firmly set on ‘leaving Duchamp’ and ‘leaving modernism’ as her interest in
politically engaged feminist practice explodes the necessity for the monolithic paradigms
of subversive practice that Duchamp once represented.

Another significant challenge to contemporary art practice is represented by Hilary
Robinson’s essay on ‘Beauty, the universal, the divine: Irigaray’s re-valuings’, in which
Robinson offers a close reading of some of Irigaray’s strategies for the reconceptualization
of traditional modernist aesthetic and critical categories of beauty, the universal and the
transcendent. Her aim is to use Irigaray’s critical framework as a way of both exploding
modernist aesthetic discourse and as a context for reading two recent art works by women
which have side-stepped easy aesthetic categorization within the framework of the legacy of
modernist critical practice that is still prevalent today. The point of using Irigaray as a
framework is precisely because in her writing she seeks to dismantle existing epistemologies
and rebuild them providing new shifts of emphasis and value. Her writing is not concerned
with the exposure of the omissions and suppressions of modernist discourse; rather, it is
concerned with the complete dismantling and reconstruction of the terms and values of the
debate. As Robinson astutely points out, Irigaray’s work is ‘non-modernist’. Her position is
not one of opposition but rather one of ‘complex difference’ (p. 160).

In her elucidation of Irigaray’s re-valuings, Robinson concentrates specifically on a
close analysis of one essay entitled ‘How can we create our Beauty’. She reads the essay as
Irigaray’s re-conceptualization of the values of female beauty in which beauty for women is a potential state of being. She then proposes it as a new way of thinking which side-steps women’s art practice within modernism (in which themes of pain and ugliness predominate), in order to open up new spaces for the representation of beauty by women practitioners. Both Irigaray’s essay and Robinson’s analysis of it go through an intricate series of manoeuvres to arrive at this point but it is unfortunate that in some of the most crucial aspects Robinson’s analysis relies more on assertion than proof. For example, she announces that Irigaray’s essay ‘is a discussion which requires the reader to think differently: to reconceptualise what might be productive of beauty and what might constitute the transcendental and the universal.’ (p. 163) However, the critical apparatus needed to demonstrate that Irigaray’s plea is not an essentialist one is not provided by Robinson other than through our acceptance of her assertion. Presumably only a reading at source will provide such demonstration and also provide the key to distinguishing Irigarayan universality and transcendence for women as a worthwhile pursuit. Robinson fails to explain why a re-definition of universality for women is necessary at all or even how it will account for differences between women and avoid the usual pitfalls associated with such problematic terms. Perhaps the closest she gets to an explanation is in her analysis of the Irish conception of the term mother as a site of possible Irigarayan inter-subject economy, in which ‘women’s identity must be permitted, known and defined.’ (Irigaray, as cited by Robinson, p. 165) Nevertheless, the full impact of Robinson’s analysis is at its most cogent in her consideration of two art works which she reads as ‘performative of Irigarayan thinking’ (p. 163); Louise Walsh’s Monument to the Low-Paid Women Workers (1993) and Dorothy Cross’s Amazon (1992). Louise Walsh’s Monument to the Low-Paid Women Workers is a cast bronze street-level statue of two women in contemporary dress which stands in a busy street in central Belfast. Robinson reads the women as representative of a mother–daughter relationship. A particularly welcome feature of her analysis is the consideration of a contemporary piece of public art within a sophisticated theoretical framework in which class, gender and racial issues are paramount in both the work and in the critical reading of it. Contemporary public art as a distinct discipline with its own set of practices and conventions has up until recently left it largely impervious to fruitful encounters with theoretical frameworks derived from other disciplines within the British and European academy. Issues of policy that demand historically located site-specificity, audience sensitivity and durability of materials have been paramount while the ways in which public art can activate, manipulate, promote or intervene into the gendered, racial and social power relations of a particular site have often been strategically avoided or glossed over. Robinson’s analysis therefore offers a particularly useful model for future research. While acknowledging the history of the piece in terms of its location and siting, as well as its critical reception by both the council who commissioned it, the press and the local audience, she uses the information to provide a more nuanced reading of the gender politics of the piece which had been initially disparaged as representing ‘two bimbos’. Finally, she reflects that audience reactions to the sculpture appear to be split along the gender divide, with many women responding positively to it as a neutral space for mediation between women that is not restricted to their political involvement with the Peace Movement. On the whole, then, Robinson’s essay offers a fascinating reading of work by women that also opens up a hitherto rather sterile area for future theoretical debate.

The diversity of the essays represented in Deepwell’s collection could be read as a sign of the plurality of voices that evidence the instability of difference rather than the monolithic coherence of the transcendent subject that has for so long legitimized masculinized myths of modernism. However, it could also be read as an arbitrary choice of subject matter that is only partially brought together through Deepwell’s editorial
abilities in her introduction to the text. Although, as individual articles, each of the essays often points the way towards further avenues for investigation, they do not necessarily provide the material for a coherent volume whose title seems so all-embracing. It would have been useful to the reader if methodologies and reasons for the choice of subject matter had been made more explicit and also if the essays had been explained in terms of what they were rather than what they were not trying to achieve. In addition, the text could possibly have been improved slightly if each of the contributors had located themselves and their practice more explicitly in order to provide a text in which a range of coherent theoretical models for feminist intervention into dominant paradigms of modernity and modernism were explored. I am not pleading here for feminist research by numbers but rather for a slightly tighter set of criteria for inclusion in an edited volume of this sort. However, as indicated above, all the essays do offer insightful perspectives into their chosen areas and work well to illuminate darker moments of modernist history while leaving the reader with a desire for a further expanded volume on the same subject.

A text that provides just such an expanded thesis on a specific moment of modernist history is Marsha Meskimmon’s excellently researched and conceptualized book on German women artists during the Weimar period. In We Weren’t Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism the key issue of the author’s feminist interpretation is not to valorize women’s art practice for the sake of it, but rather to interrogate the tropes of modernist art practice and to investigate the difference in gender-specific approaches to the same tropes in order to produce a much fuller account of German modernism. The title of the book is taken from a quotation by the Hanoverian artist Greta Overbeck from an interview of 1976. In the interview, Overbeck is reminiscing about her own critical position within the German art world of the 1920s and 1930s. As Meskimmon deftly analyses the chosen passage from the interview, the premise of much of the book unfolds. Overbeck’s words tell of a history of modernism that has been based on exclusions and preferred choices but not on representative practices. Meskimmon’s work is therefore intended to challenge ‘the historical construction of modernism as a unified and singular field’ (p. 13), and she achieves this in a number of innovative and impressively researched ways. As a basis, she establishes the fact that there was a thriving Frauenkultur in existence in Weimar Germany and that female participation in the public realm was not the aberrative occurrence of a few brave individuals, as many earlier histories of modernism might have us believe. Throughout the text she is also particularly adept at locating her own subject position very clearly. A further point, and one which was also clarified in her earlier work on women’s self-portraiture, The Art of Reflection, is the rationale for her choice of women artists as subjects and the way in which they will be located in the text. Meskimmon anticipates and squarely confronts any possible theoretical objections, shooting them down with ease and erudition. The choice of women artists is a deliberate strategy designed ‘to begin a process of thinking through radical difference’ very much in the Irigarayan sense that Robinson has also adopted in the essay considered above. The women artists cited are not chosen as representations of a feminine aesthetic nor are their works read as ‘unmediated expressions of their “real” experiences as women’ (p. 9). Rather, the works cited by Meskimmon are analysed in their various relations to certain key tropes of Weimar culture. One of the many rich outcomes of this approach is radically to rethink our cherished assumptions about the ways in which female sexuality was performed in and through that culture. The five main chapters – the Prostitute, the Mother, the Hausfrau, the Neue Frau and the Garçonne – represent the five main tropes against which Meskimmon maps her readings. By beginning with the familiar icon of deviant female sexuality, the prostitute, Meskimmon is immediately able to establish the trajectory of her text. This is a book that deconstructs stereotypical modernist renditions of female sexuality and resitutes image in terms of the embodied subjectivities of the artist and the viewer in a deliberate
counter against the mythologies of transcendental authorial intent. At the same time, the production of visual meaning is also contextualized within specific historical and socio-political frameworks. Central to each of the chapters are a few carefully chosen images by women that are slowly and clearly unmasked to reveal the many layers of Weimar’s cultural, political and social history in gendered and racial terms. Thus, for example, Dorothea Wiisten-Koeppen’s painting entitled A Women of 1934 (Fishman Collection, Wisconsin) is strategically situated as the basis for an entire discourse on the political, social and historical construction of German concepts of ‘motherhood’ at the onset of Hitler’s Third Reich. Rather than presenting us with a defined image of what it was to be a woman in 1934, Koeppen’s image is shown to have an ironic and satirical purchase on just such constructions. Perhaps the most evocative and moving image, though, is one by Grethe Jürgens of ten years later, entitled Self-Portrait in Front of Ruins (Historisches Museum, Hanover, 1944), which is also the final image of the book. A fully frontal pose of one individual confronting the loss of her studio and her street, it is painted in a monumentally realist style and is just one small site in which, as Meskimmon so persuasively and powerfully argues, ‘world history has collided with female subjectivity.’ (p. 242) Indeed, such apposite remarks leave little room for further comment other than to conclude that one of the key issues that seems to underpin much of the writing under review is that the critics’ interpretations are never stable and depend as much on the embodied subjectivity of the interpreter. Thus, the books under review represent much more than the recovery of lost histories; rather, they have set off on the road towards complete redefinition of critical thinking in which instability and subjective incoherence provide the tools for a more nuanced critical vocabulary. At the start of the millennium they all offer exciting developments within feminist art history and ones which hopefully will offer a fruitful basis for thinking through a politicized art practice for a new era.

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Notes

2 The primary strategy is a focus on difference as a way of re-valuing concepts. For further details see Irigaray, Luce, ‘How can we create our Beauty’, in Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference, London: Routledge, 1993.
3 I am referring specifically to the development of the discipline within this country and Europe not the USA, where theoretically discursive interventions into the discipline of public art and urban planning are more prevalent. See, for example, Deutsche, Rosalyn, Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics, Cambridge Mass., 1996, Lacy, Suzanne, Mapping the Terrain, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995, Senie, Harriet, Contemporary Public Sculpture, Oxford, 1992. Exceptions in this country include work by Tim Hall on the democratization of space and Malcolm Miles’s recent intervention in Art, Space and the City, London: Routledge, 1997.
4 See, for example, Taborska, Halina, Current Issues in Public Art, Lulham Press, London, 1998. Sara Selwood’s excellently researched study The Benefits of Public Art, London 1995, published by the Policy Studies Institute, is an extremely thorough investigation into and deconstruction of the policies that govern the commissioning and siting of art in public places in the UK. As such it is a critical and analytical work that deliberately declares its remit as intending ‘to contribute to the evaluation and formulation of public policy in respect of public art’ (p. 6). Neither of these texts fill the gap left by the need for more theoretically discursive analyses of art and public space that Robinson’s essay begins to address, although both of them remain invaluable contributions to the field.