



The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader

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history-writing, concepts and world-views related to that often slippery notion of »contemporary art«.

Endnotes

1. The main sources employed here regarding Terry Smith, is his article »What is Contemporary Art? Contemporaneity and Art to Come«, *Konsthistorisk tidskrift*, Vol. 71, No. 1–2, 2002, pp. 3–15.
2. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997.

Amelia Jones (ed.). **The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader**. Second edition, Routledge, London and New York, 2010, 693 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-54370-5

The first edition of *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* was published in 2003 as the opening volume of the Routledge series »In Sight« which is intended to consolidate and develop visual culture studies. Last year saw the publication of the *Reader's* second revised and expanded edition. The original 62 essays of the first edition have grown to 73, 40 percent of which are new to the second edition. The new essays have a stronger focus on globalization, new media technologies and intersectional identity politics. Many of the articles by well-known historians, critics and theorists such as John Berger, Judith Butler, Mary Ann Doane, Donna Haraway, bell hooks, Mary Kelly, Laura Mulvey, Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock are considered canonical texts.

The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader is edited by Amelia Jones, Professor and Grier-son Chair in Visual Culture at McGill University, Montreal, and a distinguished feminist scholar in the fields of art history and visual studies. In her introductory essay, »Conceiving the intersection of feminism and

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visual culture, again«, she explicitly addresses the relevance of feminism »as a mode of thinking about power« in relation to global transformations—not least the »war on terror« and the acute crisis of capitalist economy—during the last decade (p. 1). The reorganisation of the second edition is to be understood in this light, and it is also visualized in the shift of imagery for the second edition's frontispiece. The frontispiece of the first edition showed a page from *Womanspace Journal* from 1973 with images of artworks defined as »Female Imagery«.¹ In contrast to this, the frontispiece of the second edition is a cover of *Ms. Magazine* from 2009, showing Barack Obama tearing open his white shirt to reveal a T-shirt with the text »This is what a feminist looks like«. This illustration opens up for a discussion of several of the issues that have been further emphasized in the second edition of the *Reader*: intersectionality, globalization and mass media's image cultures. The updated frontispiece also underscores feminism as a crucial political force in today's visual culture, as opposed to the tendency from the 1990s onwards to historicize and/or politically neutralize feminism (declaring the end of feminism or speaking in terms of a post-feminist condition). The insistence on feminism's continuing relevance also makes sense in light of the last decade's intensified

institutionalisation of feminisms in art through large-scale exhibitions in Europe and the US.

Amelia Jones locates a common denominator in feminism's and visual culture's »political concern« and in their shared interests in »cultural forms as informing subjective experience« (p. 2). This implies an understanding of visual culture as a set of practices with shared methodologies and theoretical approaches (e.g. Marxism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and feminism), rather than a scholarly field defined by its objects of research. She stresses the importance of recognising feminism(s) in the plural and advocates intersectional analyses which theorize gender as a mode of subjectivity that is inextricably interwoven with other forms of identification. The editor also emphasizes the ways in which feminism and visual culture have mutually informed one another and characterizes the rich intersections between the two as »a reciprocally weighted relationship« (p. 4). However, within cultural studies there has been a tendency to ghettoize feminism as a separate category, hence deeply underestimating its cultural value and intellectual vigour. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* explicitly encounters this misrecognition.

The *Reader* is intended as a resource for students and researchers as well as for non-specialists and provides »a historiography of feminist approaches to visual culture« (p. 5). Amelia Jones has carefully avoided a linear grand narrative by using chronology only within each thematic section. This repetitive, or rather cyclic, narrative structure might in itself be described as an implicit historiographic critique of the logic of conventional Western (art) histories. The essays are divided into seven sections, each provided with a short introduction by the editor, which com-

ments upon and frames the selection of texts included.

The opening part, »Provocations«, contains essays commissioned especially for the anthology, in contrast to the rest of the texts in the book which previously have been published elsewhere. Emphasizing issues of globalization and the importance of intersectionality, the »Provocations« are contributions to current debates about feminisms and visual culture. Lisa E. Bloom's call for »transnational« feminist art communities is a direct response to these pressing issues. But it also illustrates the continuing difficulty to think beyond feminism's own hegemonic structures as it implicitly takes »Western feminism« for granted. To my mind, however, »Western feminism« is a notion that usually reduces, be it explicitly or implicitly, North American and European feminisms to the local feminisms of the US, UK and France. Therefore it has become urgent to address differences *within* so-called Western feminism as well. There are, for example, cross-cultural conflicts within European feminisms, as clearly illustrated in an essay by Angela Dimitrakaki in the »Histories« section of the *Reader*.

The following six parts of the book are structured according to well established fields of interest within feminist art history and visual culture studies. Part two, »Representation«, illustrates how feminist analyses of visual culture have adopted the insights of semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis and performance theory to question modernist formalist methods for understanding and interpreting art and other images, to deconstruct the notion of representation itself, and to expand theories on vision, visibility and visuality by introducing feminist theories of embodiment.

The embodied subject, and its relation to visual imagery, is further explored in the »Bodies« section. The essays in this part of the book offer new, and much-needed, ways to think about visuality and gendered subjects beyond established feminist concepts as the gaze and the fetish. The »Bodies« section also includes Lynda Nead's excellent theorizing of the female nude, a key contribution to the subject that was not included, to my surprise, in the first edition of the *Reader*.

»Differences« concern sexual difference theory and introduces its major line of thoughts based on psychoanalysis and Simone de Beauvoir's critique of Hegel's master-slave dialectic. It also presents more recent debates on the obvious limitations of sexual difference theory. The focus on singular identity categories that has permeated this field of research has been questioned, or is by now even overturned, by analyses informed by postcolonial and queer theories.

One of feminism's major contributions to the field of visual culture has been its sharp historiographic and institutional critique. The essays in the »Histories« section of the book discuss various strategies for differencing the canon and questioning the disciplinary logics of art and architecture history as well as film studies, dance history and performance studies.

The »Readings/Interventions« part focuses on the shared desire of feminism and visual culture studies to break down the boundaries between high art and mass media's and popular culture's visual images. This might appear to be the least cohesive part of the book, but the diversity of perspectives, topics and images presented in the essays rather demonstrates the valuable synergies obtained by the intersection of feminism and visual culture studies. The concluding part of the

book, »Technologies«, further expand and deepen this discussion in relation to images produced in and through new technologies. It offers insights on new modes of representation in the digital age, problematizes the masculinist tendencies of new technologies, and addresses the question of what subjects new media imagery proposes and how these are embodied.

In contrast to the first edition of the *Reader*, which contained key texts by feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, originally written in French, as well as a contribution by the German sociologist Klaus Thelewit, the essays included in the second edition are deliberately limited to a narrow Anglophone context. Only texts written and/or published originally in English have been included in the book. As a feminist scholar working outside, or rather *beside* and sometimes at the margins, of that particular linguistic and geographical area, I appreciate that the editor is careful to position herself in the vast field of feminist research around the world. Also, I sympathize with the choice to limit the anthology exclusively to the Anglophone feminist discourse, not least because an inclusion of a limited number of texts originating from »other« discourses always run the risk to appear as a conventional hegemonic strategy which—whether deliberately or unwittingly—only reinforces status quo.

The editor's discussion on the ambiguous status of the Anglophone contributions to the broader fields of feminist discourses—both crucial and clearly limited—indicates a self-reflexivity that is all too rare in similar contexts and therefore very welcome (even though the title of the book—*The Reader*—is somewhat contradictory to these insights). The »admitted cultural myopia« of the

Reader in part turns the reading experience into a paradox: the majority of the theories, perspectives and discussions are certainly familiar to me but there are also discourses from which I feel slightly alienated, as they are not compatible with the contexts and situations where I am positioned. But the effect of this is inspiring and encouraging rather than disturbing.

The Feminism and Culture Reader is presumably the most solid, comprehensive and useful anthology in this field of study at the moment. Considering this, it might seem presumptuous to object to anything at all. However, I am slightly surprised that the steady growing field of research on visual culture and masculinities is only sparsely represented in the book (I am thinking here of key texts by, for example, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Kobena Mercer, Anthea Callen and Susan Bordo, which would clearly have qualified for an inclusion in this context). Also, one could have expected more illustrations in a volume like this (44 illustrations in a 693 pages book), and I am not sure I understand the logic behind the selection of images that are actually there.

However, these are marginal remarks, and I cannot think of another volume that offers

such a generous collection of essays—both indispensable classical texts and provocative interventions in current debates—on feminisms and visual cultures. The diversity of intellectual arguments, the wide range of theoretical approaches and the pluralism in feminist perspectives are almost overwhelming. In short: this is an essential collection of seminal texts that have set the agenda for and continues to inform feminist encounters with visual culture in the Anglophone world, and beyond.

Endnotes

1. The artworks represented were by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Barbara Hepworth, Georgia O'Keeffe, Louise Nevelson and Lee Bontecou.

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