

Introduction: The Sisterly Arts?

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If one were to trace a history of the connection between women and interarts issues, finding the “original” starting point would be a never-ending task, although if one were content with the Western cultural tradition a good point of entry might well be Ovid’s redaction of two classical myths: the story of Narcissus, with its alignment of the “gaze” with the male and its reduction of the female voice to the status of an “echo,” and the myth of Philomela, with its story of how she managed to take revenge on the seducer who had cut off her tongue by weaving her plight into a tapestry. Moving to the Renaissance period, one might enlist the perception of the “blind” Milton in his version of Genesis in *Paradise Lost*, and especially his erotic interarts comment about Eve’s preference for “body language”: “Not Words alone pleas’d her” (8.37). In the 19th century, in turn, and putting aside the all too familiar “silent” yet paradoxically speaking “unravished bride” of Keats’s “Ode,” one might mention Lewis Carroll’s Alice, who initially responds to the story that her older sister is reading by exclaiming, “What is the use of a book without pictures,” but who ultimately discovers that words and images are equally untrustworthy and dangerous. Nor

would it be hard to make such a history an “illustrated” text. In the visual arts there are many paintings featuring women involved in verbal or acoustical activities—reading books or playing musical instruments—and indeed for the Pre-Raphaelites, attempts to bring about a *ménage-à-trois* of the “sister arts” of painting-music-poetry repeatedly involved recourse to or inscription of a female/feminine presence.

As much as such works feature women, however, so much do they also constitute a patriarchal tradition of speaking for them, and it is only in the 20th century that women have fully and concertedly come to the fore as artists in their own right, as well as becoming very critically vocal about the nature and purpose of the arts and their relationships. Although this new situation seems to hold great promise for all concerned, insofar as such speaking out is part of the general march of progress of the women’s movement, it also brings with it a crucial question: is interarts, then, simply new territory for feminists to claim, or does it entail mutual revisioning? That is, one needs to consider whether feminism has indeed led to a better understanding of how different media operate and interrelate or whether it’s more a case of what the trite but perhaps gender-appropriate truism would call “throwing out the baby with the bathwater.” Conversely, one needs to consider whether feminists’ use of an interarts approach has yielded any new insights into women’s issues or whether it’s more a case of applied theorizing—imposing an ideology already fixed via other methodological approaches. While there can’t, of course, be any easy answers to either question, a survey of what seem to be the distinguishing features of feminist interarts theory and practice can suggest where the weight of evidence seems to lie.

For this purpose, it is perhaps instructive first to note that in some ways both sides have recently and independently been preparing for this merger in the sense that current feminist theorizing about gender has many points of affinity with current interarts theorizing about the different media. Significantly, the most basic point of similarity here is a division of opinion in both areas about their respective topics of investigation: i.e., just as there tends to be a split among feminists with respect to how gender identity should be defined, so interarts critics tend to disagree about what is the essence of the arts. The next point of affinity in turn is the way the internal divisions in each camp tend to match up with the other. For example, similar to those feminists who regard the human being as essentially “androgynous,” and who accordingly relegate sexual difference to the socializing process, are aestheticians who argue that all of the arts are basically and equally semiotic systems and

that difference pertains only to conventions or how the various modes are used. In the same way, paralleling feminists who regard gender as grounded in “biological” constitution, are interarts critics who argue that there are innate differences between the various forms of aesthetic expression.

Nor does this affinity between feminist and interarts theorizing remain strictly at the level of analogy; the two approaches come directly together in concerns about the historical tradition of gendering the arts—i.e., labeling an art form “masculine” or “feminine”—and it is also here that one might be said to find the first evidence of the way that feminism has had a needed impact on interarts theorizing. For while male critics have for some time been drawing attention to such sexual politics—especially critics concerned with the dynamics of *ecphrasis*—feminist criticism has moved such “formalist” discussions into the real world, showing how the gendering of the arts is no innocent rhetorical exercise but part of a power structure which has practical consequences in women’s actual lives.

Significantly, the artworks which seem increasingly to attract the most critical attention are those with a visual orientation—whether it be paintings/films, “illustrated” texts, or verbal modes which address or play off of pictorial traditions. Up to a point, this focus on the visual is easy to account for: even more so than the literary canon, graphic art has been the aesthetic area most closed to women at the same time that it has been the favorite mode for male appropriation of the female body. Thus focusing on the mode most associated with “male voyeurism” constitutes a way of deliberately inviting the gaze, as it were, a way of taking control of the situation. In addition, insofar as the image is traditionally envisioned as “mute,” then showing how such art “talks” is a strategically effective way of protesting the historical “silencing” of women. Even more important, however, may be the extent to which pictorial works—amongst all other aesthetic productions—are most associated with what is conventionally perceived as “Art,” as evidenced by the greater prestige accorded museums than libraries. By breaking into and overturning the cornerstone of “High Art” traditions, then, women artists and feminist critics have found the perfect way to function as social iconoclasts.

Inherent in “High Art” traditions of any media, however, are notions of each mode’s “purity,” and thus an essential ingredient of such feminist iconoclasm is not merely working in a visual mode but also contaminating the image with its “other.” Sometimes this miscegenation takes the direct form of conjoining the visual and the verbal, but it is also effected by encoding historicizing details that encourage one to “read” the image rather than merely to

“view” it. Insofar as this mixing of modes involves an evocation of difference and constraints in the ironic interests of destabilizing such demarcations, such art also serves as its own subtle way of questioning—by conjoining—both a “free will” or “androgynous” concept of gender and a “fixed fate” or “biological” approach to the issue. Not surprisingly, then, feminist interarts criticism tends to refrain from binaristic questions about which art form best expresses the realities of women’s lives, arguing instead that only a composite form is adequate.

Yet in some ways it would seem that even a mixed mode is wanting—that the “whole story” can never be told, although here another factor comes into play. There is a great deal of “con” both in women’s “deconstruction” of patriarchal traditions and in their own “self-constructions.” Sometimes it takes the form of deflecting attention away from important issues, sometimes it takes the comedic form of pretending to be frivolous, and sometimes it takes the form of cultivating a reputation for being eccentric. Whether motivated by a sense that subterfuge is the best means to subversion or by a feeling that the real self is something too personal to be put on public display, the guiding spirit of such endeavors seems to be Emily Dickinson, with the cryptic advice she offered in a poem which is itself a gem of playing off the respective merits of “show and tell”:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—*

Long before current feminists, in short, Dickinson could be said to have articulated a “performance” theory of gender and its relation to artistic practice, reminding us of the need to proceed with extreme caution in any attempt to “represent women,” even when it’s a case of discussing their own “self-representations,” and when the interpreter is herself a woman.

One of the great “virtues” of the present collection of essays, therefore, is the way that the contributors take neither their “subjects” nor ways of “representing women” for granted, and in the process serve to problematize both traditional interarts theorizing and too easy feminism. Two of the essays, for

example, discuss theatrical representations, one (Peterson) exploring the way that the “silencing of women” is enacted in the ironic form of visual depictions of an actual but only “reported” death wherein, however, the reporter is another woman, while another (Nothof) discusses how “objectification” confronts “subjectivity” in the form of the difficulties encountered by both male and female playwrights in attempting to stage the life of a woman painter and autobiographer. Two other essays focus on male-dominated traditions, one (DiMarco) showing how the dramatic monologue can become the ideal means of exposing the socio-economic power structure inscribed in the conventions of “nude” art, while another (Paton) explores the way that the imperialistic identification of woman and nature complicates things for a woman attempting to use landscape as a medium for expressing lesbian desire. Two other essays deal with “illustrated texts,” one (Martyniuk) exploring the way that a woman writer reversed and doubled back on an avant-garde tactic she had previously used in order to progress even further in seducing the reader, another (Bluemel) showing how the metaphors of violence that theorists have used to describe text/image relations are concretely employed by a woman “versifier” to dramatize aggressive appetites both toward and within the “gentle sex.” That it is not merely the sex of the author but also the constraints of the medium that affect how gender can be depicted is the focus of another essay (Watkins), which ironically demonstrates the lesser “feminist” success of a current film directed by a woman than the greater effectiveness of the earlier woman’s novel on which it is based. Finally, addressing the contention that in a post-modern milieu all forms of art have become exhausted of any revolutionary potential, another essay (Raaberg) demonstrates the way that collage still works for women because of the different purposes for which they have used it—one of which is to undermine this defeatist attitude itself—at the same time that the essay argues against any attempts to see collage as a definitive women’s mode and emphasizes the need to appreciate the sophisticated self-consciousness of current female practice in this area.

Taken collectively, therefore, the essays in this collection do suggest that the merger of feminist and interarts theorizing has been therapeutic and productive on both sides; moreover, by giving new currency to the old notion of woman’s “infinite variety” they have equally put a positive spin on the old complaint that “woman’s work is never done” —or “undone,” we might say.

*Reproduced from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little, 1960.