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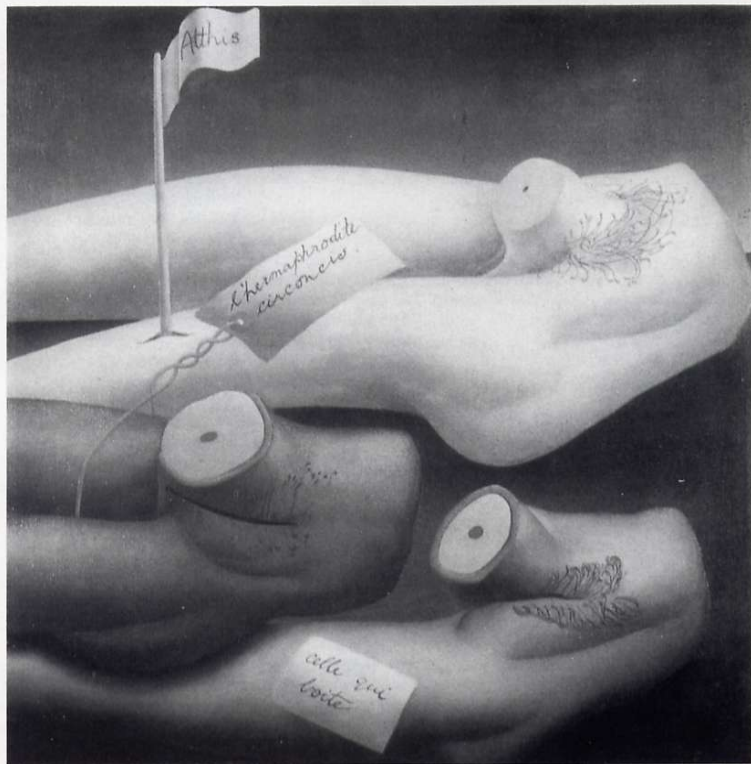


DIRTY WORDS FOR THE TATE

BY CHRISTINE BATTERSBY

What should a feminist who thinks about art do with the concept of 'aesthetic value'? The phrase has such a dirty philosophical history as to render it thoroughly problematic to feminists of all descriptions. Should we junk the notion of evaluation altogether? Revise it? Retain it (assigning it a place in some dialectical relationship with feminist values)? These two final positions are not necessarily alternatives; but both are out of step with the purist view which would reject the whole tradition of 'art-history-as-appreciation'.

This is the position argued by Griselda Pollock in *Vision and Difference*. (1) Pollock believes that there is no point in feminist art critics seeking to insert women artists within a framework that distinguishes 'between the major and the minor, the good and the bad, the eternally valued and the fashionably momentary'. Any concern 'with quality — i.e. positive and negative evaluations of artefacts' is suspect: an 'alternative' (feminist) standard of appreciation would merely result in 'another way of consuming art': The effect is to leave intact that very notion of evaluating art, and of course the normative standards by which it is



Ichel Coloquhoun, "The Pine Family", 1941. Courtesy of Whitford and Hughes.

done.' Instead, Pollock adopts a sophisticated form of Marxist analysis: 'I am arguing that feminist art history has to reject all this evaluative criticism and stop merely juggling the aesthetic criteria for appreciating art. Instead it should concentrate on historical forms of explanation of women's artistic production.'

My impression as an outsider (I'm a philosopher, not an art historian) is that, in this country, Pollock's position on evaluation represents that of the feminist academic mainstream. It certainly represents the position that has been theorised in the most sophisticated and compelling ways. But I will be arguing that it is neither practically desirable, nor theoretically possible to opt out of the whole arena of aesthetic evaluation. What I will be suggesting is *not* that feminist art criticism must simply seek to insert women artists in the 'canon' of great artists, but that there is no value-neutral critical space in which feminist critics can reside... and that present-day women artists will suffer unless feminist art critics employ those dirty evaluative words for feminist ends. What is needed is not an *excision* of notions of aesthetic evaluation, but a

Winifred Knight, "The Deluge", Loaned from the Barbican from "The Last Romantics", © The Tate Gallery



revision of such notions: a revision radical enough both to insert women artists into the 'canon' of great artists, and to bring the notion of a universal, historically-timeless canon into question.

I am not, in any sense, intending to devalue or condemn the kind of Marxist-feminist practice that Pollock recommends. The analysis of art institutions and the material conditions of artistic production has revolutionised (and surely will continue to revolutionise) feminist art-historians' understanding of their discipline. But I do think we should learn from Berthold Brecht's working slogan for a revolutionary art: 'Use what you can'. And I do believe that feminist art critics who seek to revalue the work of female (and male) artists also have a role to play in transforming artistic display and practice. We can't yet afford a new feminist orthodoxy (whether Marxist, psychoanalytical or 'deconstructionist') that rejects as merely 'liberal', 'individualistic' or 'humanist' the whole tradition of art-appreciation.

It is depressing that feminist art theory in this country should have had such a limited success in changing the idea that there have been few interesting women artists in the past. We haven't even got far in the limited task of assessing the (small proportion of) works by women artists that are

already in public ownership. There have, of course, been the occasional exhibitions of 'Women's Art'. But, important though such exhibitions are, they cannot be the primary tactic for changing what is on display in our galleries, since it is the notion of a 'great artist' that remains integral to the acquisition and display of art in our culture.

At present those interested in assessing art by past generations of *women* must, in general, end their tours of U.K. national and provincial art galleries with a feeling of defeat. But, for all that, it is possible to be too despairing about the possibility of changing the way that British institutions manage their collections. The Tate Gallery, for example, seems to have embraced one portion of a revolutionary aesthetic in its first major re-hang for twenty years (opened 25 January). For Nicholas Serota, the new Director at the Gallery, has rejected the notion that artistic values are pre-given and that the function of a museum is simply to provide a record and display of some single, monolithic canon of 'great art'. Serota intends to change the artistic display every nine months, and via a kind of permanent revolution keep alive the question of what is (and what is not) appropriately relegated to the basements or allo-

Evelyn Williams,
'Whirlpool',
Charcoal, ink and white on linen.
244 x 244cm, 1986.

cated a subsidiary role in terms of exhibition space.

The Tate Gallery is thus *theoretically committed to a philosophy of display that should bring out of storage works by neglected women artists. But in practice* there is a spectacularly low proportion of works by female artists in the first of the Tate re-hangs... something made more noticeable by the fact that Serota opted for galleries and artistic categories (such as 'Figurative Art between the Wars', 'Neo-Romanticism', 'Abstract Art in Britain, 1949-56', 'British Figure Painting') that might have been expected to favour women. Gwen John and Barbara Hepworth are amongst the (few) women included in the new Tate catalogue; but even their works have been relegated to store in an exhibition that proves that *post-modernism* is, indeed, compatible with conservative values.

I am not wanting to pretend that the absence of woman artists is the *only* thing that is the matter with the new Tate display. The gender-blindness is symptomatic of a political blandness in the selection and description of the art-work on display. But I can't help wondering whether Serota would have found the exclusion of women quite so unproblematic had the major feminist art historians in this country not directed most of their energies to a critique of art institutions, rather than to the revaluation of the work of individual women artists. Would things have been different here had we moved along the (more humanistic, less theoretically rigorous) lines of feminist art history in the States? And how might things have turned out if *The Women Artists' Slide Library* were as well-endowed (with funds and institutional prestige) as the *National Museum of Women in the Arts* in Washington, D.C?

As it is, a handful of unfamiliar works by women artists have emerged into Tate daylight. We must welcome the acquisition and display of *The Deluge* (1920) by Winifred Margaret Knights (1899-1947) in the room devoted to 'Stanley Spencer and his Circle'. But the display of a single picture is not itself enough to establish the status of a painter as a 'major artist'. Unless some (dirty, evaluative) work is done on Winifred Knights, it seems more than likely her work will disappear into storage in nine months' time. She will exist only as a series of fragments: there will be no *oeuvre*... and hence no artist that is visible.

The present-day painter and sculptor Evelyn Williams (1929 —) records the 'lack of female role models' as her 'chief regret': "'there just haven't been many women artists'". (2) How sad that Williams should think this... for this is simply not true of the last two hundred years (except in the sense that art historians have not yet assembled the fragments in ways which allow individual art-works by women to firm into *oeuvres*). Williams mentions Stanley Spencer as an artist with whom she feels a particular affinity. Winifred Knights belongs to broadly the same (British, visionary) tradition as Williams herself. But (like most other women artists) Knight has not been granted an *oeuvre* that matures, develops and persists through the myriad changes and stages in an artist's development. She exists only via isolated images, as a member of various 'circles' or 'schools'. It is hardly surprising that Williams cannot find her foremothers.

Gombrich has suggested that there is really no such thing as 'Art', only a series of artists.(3) Against him I am asserting that there is really no such thing as an artist, only a series of art-works that critics hold together via the notion of an *oeuvre*. But the concept *oeuvre* has been used in gender-discriminatory ways. Women's works have been scattered and dispersed to a much greater extent than those of the males. Nor is this simply because of the material disadvantages under

which women produce their art. Inherent in the notion of an *oeuvre* — and hence built into the notion of an *oeuvre* — and hence built into the notion of an 'artist' — is a value judgement... a notion of a *significant, important* or (at least) *interesting* expression of a fully-human self. But since the norms and ideals for human personality are based on the development of the male psyche, women have to struggle to get their art-works interpreted in such *generous* ways.

Thus, in addition to work on collectives, we need work on women *as individuals*: of the type that, in recent years, has allowed Gwen John and Frida Kahlo to emerge from the shadows. We need exhibitions (and critical 'appreciations') which allow us to see how the artist developed (or failed to develop, and suffered) as she struggled to create in an environment in which the forms for creativity (and for individuality) privilege the male. There have, of course, been some exhibitions of this type in our smaller galleries. But even there the work is often displayed in ways that make it hard to understand the particular and peculiar difficulties faced by women who are artists.

For example, the 1988 exhibition of work by Hannah Höch (1889-1978) presented her as if she were merely a Dadaist and creator of collages. The oil paintings, watercolours and sculptures that were an integral part of her remarkably lengthy artistic career (and which were contained in the much-larger German exhibition of her work) did not tour the U.K. By contrast, the 1989 exhibition of Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985) at the I.C.A. contained work from a variety of media and the whole of her artistic life. But it was nevertheless obfuscating, for the display was organised round similarities in subject-matter, and not chronologically. This can, of course, be a valuable philosophy of display for artists whose work has become over-familiar; but Oppenheim certainly does not fit into that category.

In fact, a chronological account of a female artist's life can surprise much more than thematic display. This is shown by a current retrospective of the Dutch painter Else Berg (1877-1942) in the Netherlands (Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, 9.12.89-26.1.90; Gemeente Museum de Wieger, Duerne, 4.2.18.3.90). In her earliest paintings Berg is at her most abstract, the vibrant colours and simple lines suggesting alliances with Matisse. But by the time of her death in Auschwitz, Berg's life as a Jew and a woman had made her seek (not always successfully) to combine strong elements of social realism with her more formalist concerns.

It is important that we should understand the processes that might pressurise a woman to live her artistic life in what we generally think of as a 'backwards' direction: from abstraction to realism. Since women artists have to gain access to display-spaces which have been organised around the principle of 'genius' — and since *typical* 'genius' was theorised as an *atypical* (often feminine) *male* — it is important to learn from the way that past generations of women artists coped with the paradoxes of being both female and creators (4) A *chronological* exploration of Höch's and Oppenheim's lives would, I think, have revealed this as the tension at the heart of their fractured *oeuvres*.

In *The Pine Family* (1941), Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988) has provided a counter to the dominant view of genius as super-male (an androgyne, with strong male lusts and a counter-active 'feminine' side), and woman artist as a 'monster' (a hermaphrodite, less-than-female). But it is not just the Surrealist and Dadaist women who manipulated (and resisted) theoretical models which linked artistic creativity with *displaced* male procreativity and *misplaced* female procreativity. To



understand what is (and is not) subversive about past art-work by women we need feminist art historians to pressure institutions into the display of the *oeuvres* of individual women artists. But this means we have to write back on to the agenda of feminist art history the 'appreciation' and 'evaluation' of the work of individual women artists... in the past, as well as in the present.

To evaluate a painting favourably is not simply to say that one likes it, that others like it, or that an élite of critics like it. An evaluation is not a report (either about external properties or about the state of mind of the observer). To evaluate is not to describe what one *does* like or think, but what one *ought* to like or think. It is to set up an ideal observer as a standard of comparison: against which one's own (and others') likes and dislikes are to be judged. This ideal observer judges the picture in viewing conditions that are as-near-as-possible ideal, and in terms

of a range of knowledge, experience, sensitivity and emotion that are appropriate for the picture under observation. It is against this ideal that all one's responses to the picture have to be judged, since terms like 'delicate', 'forceful', 'subtle' fuse factual and descriptive elements in ways that make interpretation — and even apparently neutral descriptions — through and through evaluative.

Evaluation does not imply the ideal observer (with only one range of experience, of sensitivity, of emotions and knowledge). It seems highly implausible to suppose that the ideal observer of a late Picasso would require the same qualities of mind and of knowledge as the ideal observer of a portrait by Angelica Kauffman. Whether each picture only has *one* ideal observer (i.e. whether aesthetic evaluations are universals) is a matter for debate. Personally, I would want to say that there is more than one valid response to each picture that is painted

(which is not to say, of course, that all responses are equally valid).

I hope this explanation goes some way towards making the notion of *feminist* aesthetic evaluation more acceptable. For what I am demanding is not a complete unanimity of feminist response; but also not an infinite variety of critical response. I am simply building into the notion of an 'ideal observer' a person with a range of experience, a sensibility and a body of knowledge that has been shaped by an engagement with feminist politics.

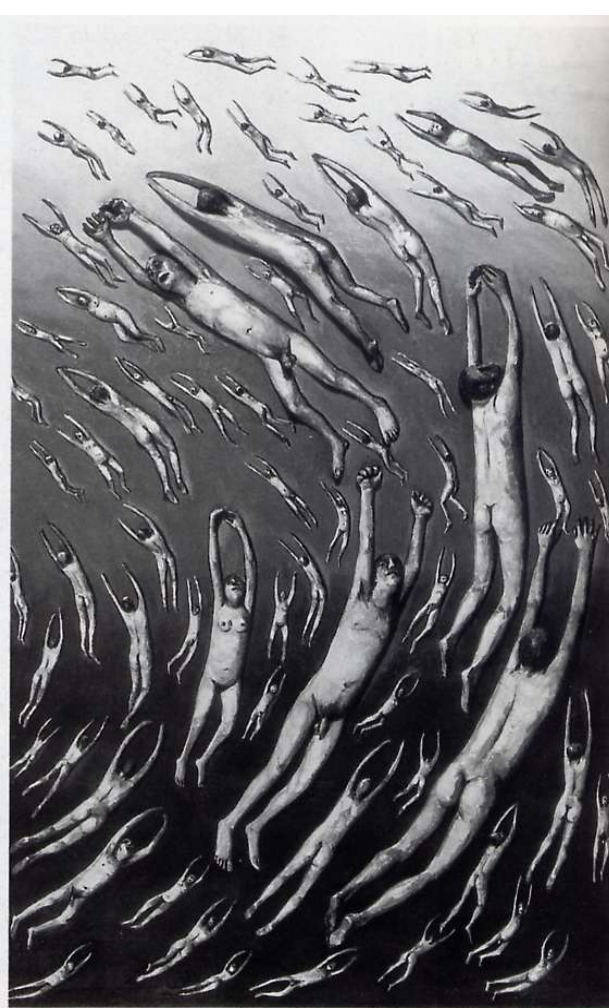
I think the hostility that feminists (and Marxists) often feel towards the notion of aesthetics comes, in part, from a confusion of 'aesthetics' with 'aestheticism'. In its original (eighteenth-century) meaning, the subject-matter of aesthetics was the 'science of the senses'. The German inventors of this branch of philosophy were concerned to discover how it might be possible to reach universal conclusions (valid for *all* persons) on the basis of individual, *immediate* (= passive and unconceptualised) sense experience. I have already said that I do not believe that it is necessary to demand that aesthetic judgements be universals. But neither do I believe in the notion of 'immediacy' which philosophers like Immanuel Kant used to justify the claim that the pure aesthetic response must abstract from all sensual appeal, and concentrate (in an utterly 'disinterested' way) on the 'form' of the object.

It is, I believe, this notion of a 'disinterested' withdrawal from all material and use value that has done most to bring the notion of the aesthetic into disrepute. For, during the nineteenth century, the aesthetic movement developed this notion of Kant's to an extreme. The aesthetic was equated with a particular attitude of mind: with a (determined) blindness to moral, social and political considerations... and even with an indifference to bodily dictates and needs. But this is a perversion of the notion of an aesthetic, and is a mode of artistic evaluation that feminists can and must revise and resist. For it by no means follows that to deny that aesthetic judgements are universal, disinterested or immediate is to deny that there are no evaluative standards that can be developed to discriminate between adequate and inadequate response to art-work... or good and bad art-works.

The Director of the Tate has said 'Art is not just data, just information... The point is that the contents of a museum, the values that a museum embodies, are not givens.' (5) I agree. But, when I look round the re-hung Tate one of the things that upsets me at least as much as the absence of female artists, is how many of the art-works on show seem to represent the perverse variety of aestheticism. Matter (flesh, but also natural objects) is endlessly prettified and idealised in ways that reveal how much real bodies are disdained. It comes almost as a relief to move into rooms of blank abstractionism... or even to those artists who vigorously assert the value of male lusts. Remarkably few of the art-works on display laugh at, reject, or counter the (false) polarities: *either form or matter; either art or politics; either god or beast*. Which is why I want to say (very firmly) that the values of this first re-hang at the Tate are unacceptable in terms of a feminist aesthetic.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, Routledge, 1988, pp. 26,27.
2. 'The Independent' (Colour Supplement), 20 January 1990.
3. E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Phaidon, 1972 ed., p. 4.
4. See my *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, London: The Women's Press, 1989.
5. 'The Independent', 23 January 1990.



Evelyn Williams
'Falling Men',
Painted Relief 122 x 76cm, 1986.