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FEMINIST ART AND AVANT-GARDISM

by

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The context for this essay is the hitherto extensive debate, entered into by feminist artists and critics, concerning the various strategies which might be adopted in feminist art, and which are considered the most appropriate and/or effective. To a large extent, the objectives of feminist art have been taken for granted. My intension here is to contribute to this debate but at the same time render problematic these objectives, since in my view further development of the debate cannot occur without further argument and clarification regarding the purposes and aims of feminist art itself.

My contention is that the objective of feminist art is the successful use of the means and processes of artistic representation to intervene in the reproduction of gender relations. Much of what follows is a detailed elaboration on what, exactly, the means and process of artistic representation are, because it is in this respect that unquestioned assumptions have, I would argue, been most damagingly deployed. Also, my insistence on speaking of 'reproduction' as referring to social (gender) relations, rather than ideologies, constitutes a substantive strand within my argument as I hope will become apparent as it proceeds.

Since gender relations help to structure and delimit the discourses of art,¹ feminist practice must include a renegotiation of the relations of artistic production. Feminists have worked to show how art institutions (education, criticism, arts councils, the gallery system, etc.) are structured according to relations of dominance and subordination which cannot maintain themselves independently from such relations within other (non-artistic) discourses, such as those of the law, morality, the labour-market, health, technology, etc. The value of this work cannot be underestimated because an important function of art (or high culture) is its specific contribution to bourgeois and patriarchal hegemony. This hegemonic function is carried out by professionals and intellectuals (historians, critics, teachers) so that art's claim to economic (and therefore ideological) disinterest, is apparently defended and justified by its resistance to capitalisation and the demands of a market economy. As long as art can appear 'independent', its hierarchisation of aesthetic pleasures can appear 'natural'. Feminist art has demonstrated that ideological (and therefore economic) interests are represented by artistic production, and as a concept (i.e. an art which is overtly tendentious) is itself anathema to the mythologies of high culture. Since gender relations cannot maintain themselves independently from, and are necessary to, the reproduction of other relations of dominance and subordination, (class, race, etc.) this initiative defines feminism as a revolutionary politics, touching

on all aspects of the social formation.

This is the definition of radical practice which this essay depends on, and as such, it takes for granted the inadequacy of innovations at the level of textual organization, or formal construction, insofar as it locates the conditions of meaning-production outside (as well as within) the product itself. Indeed, I will be arguing that the modern tradition of textual innovation (avant-gardism) is itself one of the means by which artistic claims to 'disinterest' are defended. But I am aware that this is contentious, and it is to the controversial aspects of these assertions which I will now address myself, by relating them to concrete circumstances.

Feminism and the relations of artistic production

The function and status of artistic and critical practices have been rendered problematic by feminist artists and critics themselves.

Projects such as 'Feministo',¹ 'Mother's Pride Mother's Ruin', and even 'The Dinner Party',² whatever their problems, do at least signify an intention to renegotiate the relations of artistic production, and an awareness of the necessity and urgency of such a renegotiation. Similarly, what has now become a tradition of collective exhibition for feminist artists represents a challenge to the complex of meanings and values surrounding the 'one man show'.³

The difficulties of attempting to 'break away from individual creative production (when) ... the habit of individual activity has been the norm'⁴ derive from a series of crucial issues surrounding the concept of 'creativity' and its political use. On the one hand it has been recognised that there are significant dangers in pursuing 'greatness' or 'a piece of the poisonous pie'.⁵ On the other hand, it is acknowledged that having women in positions of power (both as activists and as feminine role models) can be invaluable.

On the understanding that 'we have inherited a conception of art as something removed from other forms of social activity the antithesis of work mythologized as an oasis of creativity in the desert of alienated and mass-production capitalism idealized as the product of a few gifted and privileged people',⁶ feminist art represents an attempt to 'break with the dominant notions of art as personal expression, instead connecting it in with the social and the political and placing the artist as producer in a new situation of responsibility for her images'.⁷

In feminist criticism there has been considerable concern about the nature and function of critical practice, and acknowledgement that its place within the tradition of high culture must be questioned. Since the nineteenth century, criticism has tended 'to assume that what is at issue is a correct reading of a pre-given text, for which the critic's subjectivity is required to evaluate various texts as in some way representing "quality" ...'⁸ Deriving from an understanding of the ways in which this 'critical publicity' contributes to the reproduction of the power relations of the art-world, feminist critical practice represents an attempt to adopt a consistently questioning attitude, to provide 'provisional instruments constantly subject to correction in the interaction with new material, new insights and collective political work', in sharp contrast to the 'universal' values offered by traditional criticism.⁹ Feminist criticism does not look for artistic 'quality', it looks for feminist meanings, that is, it constructs feminist readings, and in doing so radically re-locates the source of aesthetic pleasure. This is an unforgivably tendentious approach from the perspective of 'value-free' traditional approaches, but one towards which those who see themselves as both critics and feminists have increasingly moved.

But culture cannot be reduced to the social relations of production and distribution alone. Meaning-production is made possible by conditions existing simultaneously at various levels of the social formation. Feminist meanings then, are not created exclusively but feminist artists and critics. Relations of consumption, -- the conditions under which the works are read/viewed -- are a crucial instance in the generation of cultural meanings and values, providing one of the material circumstances for the context without which cultural objects cannot signify.

Reading practices are productive. They constitute a labour which transforms a material resource (the text) into a meaningful object, i.e. one which has a social function, a use in an exchange ritual, a symbolic or sign-value. This requires both energy and skill; competences which are always acquired in the context of socially and culturally specific experience; cultural capital the value of which depends on the fields within which it can be invested in the form of knowledges and tastes. (As described by Pierre Bourdieu, see note 43.)

Reading practices are the means by which texts can or cannot represent the interests of (be meaningful to) specific social groups, for example, women. Representation always implies a specific position within social relations rather than a relation to a pre-signified reality, the means of representation therefore involve a whole economy of competences as well as the languages which bear the

traces of their circulation.

Some examples of feminist theory have acknowledged the need to define consumption as something other than the passive absorption of a message which is somehow 'transmitted' to the consumer by the producer via the text, or 'mediated' by the critic. It has been conceded that 'meaning is socially created in the consumption of the work ... (it is) impossible to separate the production of the work from its consumption',¹⁰ but often such acknowledgements are qualified by the assumption that some texts nevertheless manage to provide their own conditions of intelligibility.¹¹ My own view is that the importance of this aspect of meaning-production (the text's insertion within a series of discourses) has been seriously neglected, to the detriment of feminist attempts to intervene in the power relations inscribed within artistic discourses.

These arguments (about reading) will be returned to in a later section. At this point, I want to try to show how this neglect has created a situation in which the interchange between feminist artists and critics has brought forth a dominant textual strategy in feminist art. For the first time, much of the work produced by feminist artists recently has had a similar 'look'. For the first time, it seems to belong within the artistic avant-garde because, in formal terms, it is 'innovative' in relation to contemporary stylistic orthodoxies. This is a result of the adoption of 'deconstructive' strategies, which have their history in the succession of avant-garde art movements witnessed throughout the twentieth century. Avant-gardism is defined by the constant imperative to break with the conventions of 'readability', in favour of strategies which are intended to demonstrate the 'facticity', 'opacity' or 'productivity' of the text. It is this tradition which has made possible the mythologies of modernism (art about art) and of an art history which reduces the meaning of all art to its place within the history of form/style - despite the often overtly political intentions of many avant-garde movements.

The project of feminist art, to re-negotiate the relations of artistic production, is in danger of being reduced, as a result of this development, to the search for a rule of textual organization which is somehow intrinsically feminist or radical. Such a strategy assumes that texts can carry with them their own conditions of intelligibility, obscuring the fact that representation and meaning-production are processes involving multiple levels of practice.

One of the ways in which artistic discourses defend their claim to disinterest,

is by describing artistic production in idealist terms, i.e., as the 'phenomena' of what is assumed to be an 'essence' (Truth, Knowledge, Beauty, Purity, etc.). By focusing on consumption as a productive practice, ideologies (knowledges, pleasures, meanings, values) can be properly located as instances of the social formation. Any practice aspiring, then, to challenge the relations of artistic production is committed necessarily to a materialist approach to meaning-production. (This is taken up again in a later section)

Deconstruction, prioritizing the producer-text relationship as it does, retains idealist **categories** and concepts (or at least their theoretical effects). Defenders of deconstruction would argue to the contrary, that it represents a challenge to idealist epistemology. I will therefore substantiate this claim by first, showing how the ways in which deconstructive strategies have been critically prioritized above other strategies in feminist art, depend on a series of idealist assumptions; second, by looking at deconstruction in its context of avant-gardism and emphasizing its hegemonic function (achieved by appearing 'independent' of the economic forces operating on popular culture); third, by arguing that it derives (as do all avant-garde strategies) from a theoretical reduction of the 'material' to the 'formal'. These three characteristics are related and interdependent.

Deconstruction vs celebration and negation

Deconstruction has emerged as dominant partly because other strategies have been critically discredited.

There is, or has been, a strand in feminist art of 'celebratory' strategies which are not reducible to a series of textual innovations. They share a particular approach to the concept of 'women's experience' and its value within the women's movement, rather than a particular mode of textual organization. Aspects of it include heroinization, vaginal iconography and body-art, and references to domestic skills and pre-occupations. Classic examples of heroinization are Monica Sjoo's 'God Giving Birth' and Ann Grifalconi's 'And God created Woman in her own image', others can be found amongst the work of Margaret Harrison, Anne Newmarch, Nancy Spero, May Stevens, Susan Hiller, and Judy Chicago, to mention a few. Well-known examples of vaginal iconography include the 'Dinner Party' plates, Betty Dodson's 'Vaginal Drawings', Suzanne Santoro's 'Towards New Expression', and Shelley Lowell's 'Rediscovery'. In different ways, work as diverse, in formal terms, as Margaret Harrison's 'Craftwork', projects like 'Feministo' and 'Mother's Pride' ... and Miriam Schapiro's fabric collages, all rely heavily on connotations of the 'domestic'.

What this work has in common is an aspiration to celebrate the feminine, not as an essence, but as it is experienced by women, in their different circumstances, so that a sense of sisterhood, or solidarity, might be generated at an emotional level.

Heroization exposes the contradictions of a society which produces a dominant notion of 'woman' as physically and mentally inferior, unable or unwilling to act, while simultaneously depending (for its own reproduction) on women's abilities to act, to take initiatives, to be independent, and indeed to be depended on by men. At the same time it traces the production of contemporary symbols for women's strength and ability. (It is not about selecting 'special' women for the rest of us to 'look up to' - arguments about which women 'deserve' to be heroized and which women 'deserve' to do the selecting are irrelevant).

Vaginal iconography is a similar attempt to construct symbols of shared femaleness, involving the transformation of the 'unspeakable' into a cause for celebration. Uses of the discourses of domesticity attempt to mobilize the 'feminine' as a challenge to the hierarchies of aesthetic pleasure which, by opposing art to craft, public to private, work to leisure, cultural to natural, etc., devalue or render 'invisible' women's work as non-work or 'non-productive' labour. It is not about re-habilitating domestic skills within the realms of fine art, rather it is about 'femininity' as a terrain for the production of dominated knowledges, pleasures and values.

Above all, celebratory strategies aspire to provide a means of identification between women, in a society where isolation and fear divide and control women, whose knowledges are systematically represented as neuroses, aberrations, fantasies, etc., within the discourses of patriarchal culture. It is important to demonstrate that there is such a thing as feminine knowledge, a specifically feminine experience of the world, and that therefore culture is not 'un-gendered'. In this, celebratory strategies strike at one of the central concepts of idealist thought, and at the foundation of art's hegemonic function.

In general however, feminist criticism of celebratory strategies has been surprisingly thorough and virulent in its condemnation. The most common, if not only, justification for this criticism has been that this kind of work is 'essentialist' because it relies on a concept of essential femininity. For example, it has been argued that heroization is essentialist because 'the very notion of positive (lesbian) images of women relies on the already constituted meaning of "woman" ... (because it) considers the notion of femininity as unproblematic and positions women's culture as separate and different from mainstream

culture',¹² and because it involves 'terms of evaluation which we (feminists) have developed a critical stance towards'.¹³

Vaginal iconography has been referred to as 'anti-phallic self-validation ... feminist essentialism in art ... (which) simply reverses the terms of domination and subordination. Instead of the male supremacy of patriarchal culture, the female (the essential feminine) is elevated to primary status'.¹⁴ Apparently it 'assumes' that an emphasis on women's experience or a concern with the female body, and the production of feminist meanings are the same thing.

Work which refers to the domestic is, it is argued, similarly essentialist because it is a 'glorification' of feminine skills which assumes that women have an 'inherent creativity'¹⁵ or because it represents an attempt 'to retrieve embroidery and china-painting from the inglorious role of women's drudgery (or at best "craft") and re-allocate them to the realm of "high art"....'¹⁶

One might summarize the general response by quoting thus - 'It is just not possible to say that "women-centred" writings have any necessary relation to feminism'.¹⁷ These criticisms share a tendency to distinguish firmly between the feminine and the feminist, and a conviction that a pre-occupation with the former is a sure indication of essentialism.

Undoubtedly there are difficulties with celebratory strategies, not least problems deriving from the aspiration to address the commonality of women's experience, which can obscure important differences. For example, it might be said that 'the idea of "the community of all women" ... is an idea more popular among middle-class than among working-class women'.¹⁸ But there is no reason to assume that these difficulties are insurmountable. Surely a feminist politics must depend in some way on the possibilities of generalizing, at a symbolic level, about women's lives, indeed the impact of the women's movement on our society to date derives, I would suggest, from exactly this. Having acknowledged that feminist criticism is not about recovering the meaning of a pre-given text, or about intrinsic (even feminist) 'quality', but about making feminist readings, I find it puzzling that feminist critics have generally blocked off such possibilities in the case of celebratory work.

Why has the criticism been conducted at such an 'in general' and abstract level? If it had been pitched at the level of concrete specificities it might have been possible to argue that, in certain contexts, and, under certain

circumstances, the celebration of femininity is a highly appropriate and useful strategy for artists who wish to put their work at the service of the women's movement. It has a distinct advantage above avant-garde strategies in that it dismisses all claims to 'independence' and tries to produce work specifically for an audience (women) instead of adopting the traditional fine art attitude of indifference to audiences.

If heroinization is unacceptable because it introduces the concept of a hierarchy of women, how then could a feminist be 'horrified' to see literary giants such as Woolf and Dickinson reduced to vaginal sculptures?¹⁹ They can't have it both ways. It simply is not necessary to equate heroinization with hierarchization, nor to see vaginal imagery as a contradiction of the richness and variety of women's experiences and achievements.

The tendency for challenges to cultural hegemony to be 'rehabilitated' is a product of critical judgements and readings, so why do feminist critics collude in this process by referring to work which uses domestic skills as 'elevating' or 'glorifying' instead of emphasizing their potential for the construction of symbols for women's knowledge of their own oppression?

Why have celebratory strategies been rejected on the grounds that they are not a 'new phenomena'?²⁰ This is a naive and simplistic equation of 'the new' with 'the radical'. And, worst of all, why have these criticisms introduced distinctions (usually associated with anti-feminism) between women's experience and feminism?²¹ There is a suggestion here that political values, ideological interests, do not derive from specific, concrete, lived relations but from the professional practices of an elite group. The experience of white, middle-class class educated women is being accorded the status of 'analysis' while other women's experience is seen simply as evidence of their subordination.

Rather than concluding that 'women centred' or celebratory work is of no particular value to feminism it would be considerably more helpful to develop a critical practice in which the gender of an artist (or indeed a consumer) increases its significance. The failure to do so is evidence of the retention of idealist theories of meaning-production, because it does not construct readings on the basis of historically specific ideological identifications but claims to recover the meaning of the work which is assumed to reside at the level of 'production'. (See pp. 16-17)

Another strand in feminist art which has been the object of much unfavourable criticism consists in strategies of 'negation'. These include role-reversal,

parody and graffiti, all of which represent attempts to negate masculine representations and patriarchal values.

The classic example of role-reversal is Sylvia Sleigh's 'Philip Golub Reclining'; its function is the reversal of the gender relations of 'normal' viewing situations, in this case by taking the famous 'Venus of Rokeby' by Velasquez and replacing the woman in the original image with a passive, inert, objectified, to-be-looked-at male who is 'on display' in relation to the viewer who is presumed to be female, (Sleigh's own reflection is visible in the mirror). As a result, the 'male gaze' is robbed of its hegemonic value, since it cannot claim disinterest or appear 'ungendered'.²² This reversal of viewing relations was the theme of the ICA exhibition 'Women's Images of Men'. Whatever the differences, at a formal level, amongst the works exhibited, its feminist meaning was constituted in its shared approach to an aspect of women's experience, in its insertion in a series of discourses which structure gender relations. To turn men into the object of the female gaze is 'to return the scrutiny to appraise the male as bearer, rather than maker of significance'.²³

Parody is a common element in the work of many feminist artists, including Hannah Wilke, Lynda Benglis, Alexis Hunter, Judith Bernstein, Aimee Rankin and Barbara Kruger. This kind of work may 'exploit the fetishistic style and content of glamour advertising, reproducing its time-scale for viewing and reading, echoing its themes of auto-eroticism and violence. However, this is subverted by an edge, an ambiguity and an excess which is too incisive to sit within the parameters of the genre'.²⁴ The purpose is often to 'reclaim the sign - woman's body - from masculine fantasy, de-colonise it and re-integrate it to express aspects of female experience ...',²⁵ so a necessary element is provided by work which ridicules masculinity, subjecting its 'weltanschauung' to derision and caricature, as in May Stevens' 'Big Daddy' series.

Ad. graffiti is a way of directly confronting and commenting on patriarchal representations in an **attempt** to negate their meanings.²⁶ On one level, by 'disfiguring' advertisements, graffiti represents a vandalism of male property, expressing contempt for it and trivialising it at the same time. And on another level, it 'invests' advertisements with meanings which their producers could not have anticipated. Sometimes it involves changing the image and/or adding to, or changing, the written text, and sometimes it consists simply in adding a word or a phrase so that the same image, its formal organization

remaining completely unaltered, acquires a completely new significance by being 're-anchored'.

Negation strategies assert a culture of femininity as a culture of negation. They tend to use humour as a political weapon, and since the source of amusement is invariably men, their ideas and values, women are united in their pleasure through the symbolic come-uppance of the self-righteous, dominating male. Again the over-riding concern is to provide means of ideological identification for women, and to demonstrate that culture is not value free, but that knowledge of the world is gender-specific. It depends absolutely on a concept of a female audience, and tries to make images function in the interests of that audience as a social group with its own ideological and economic interests.

But strategies of negation have also been criticized on the grounds that they are essentialist. Usually it is argued that this kind of work depends on a 'realist' approach to representation, which results in a simple countering of 'true' female experience against the 'false' masculine version of it. Again these criticisms tend to devalue the 'feminine' by trying to locate the meaning of the text at the level of 'production' (in the relationship between producer and text) rather than accounting for the broader relations of consumption which also provide its conditions of intelligibility. Thus, these criticisms are themselves 'essentialist' since they depend on a notion of a privileged subject position from which the meaning of the text can be determined.

For instance, role-reversal has been criticized on the grounds that it cannot produce the same meanings for women as the 'original' did for men.²⁷ I would agree that to expect that it should, derives from an inadequate understanding of the processes of signification, because representations are related differently, (assymmetrically or unevenly) both to specific objects of representation and to specific viewing subjects. Representation is not a process of reflection but of the insertion of images within a series of discursive contexts. The criticism is that, while role-reversal can demonstrate this 'assymetry' of discursive oppositions, (so that difference always implies power), it is ultimately ineffective because it remain 'trapped' within them. The implication is that a genuinely radical strategy would somehow have to undercut these oppositions altogether.

Similarly, parody has been criticized on the grounds that it reinforces what it should subvert. It 'fails to challenge conventional notions of female sexuality ... has no theory of the representation of women ... what is assumed to be

progressive is actually retrograde. Being-a-woman is the essential pre-supposition underlying this art-work'.²⁸

Criticisms of ad-graffiti also tend to rely on the notion that strategies of negation are somehow inevitably 'caught up' in the values of patriarchal culture. It has been argued that 'male iconology which carries women's subordination into visual images and subsequently legitimizes women's secondary social status, it is not a mere surface gloss on an advert which can easily be peeled back to reveal "true woman" ... graffiti is caught up in, and negated by, the advert's own meaning.'²⁹

As with the criticisms of celebratory strategies, I find this response to negation perplexing. If the function of the feminist critic is to make readings which might encourage a proliferation of feminist meanings, (necessitating a view of the text in which it has no intrinsic 'qualities' of its own but must have values invested in it in productive practices, including consumption), why have these attempts to negate the values of patriarchal culture been attributed such intrinsic expressions of authorial intent?

Why is it assumed that the purpose of role-reversal is to 'produce' the same 'effect' on women as the original had on men? This prioritizes the role of the producer to an unnecessary degree. If one emphasises the reader/viewer contribution, and its function in 'viewing relations', as I have tried to do, it can be argued that role-reversals engender a proliferation of meanings beyond (but including) the discursive oppositions structuring the original.

Why is the meaning of the original (masculine) representation attributed with such a degree of fixity? Once an image has a specific set of meanings invested in it by a specific social group, it is not prevented from becoming the site of struggle over new meanings for an ideologically opposed group. The relationship between an image and the concept to which it refers is arbitrary; to become fixed it has to be motivated by a series of investments, insertions within the discourses of social relations. Any disruption in this process (which must be continual to produce its effects) results in changes in the conditions of intelligibility and therefore in the meaning of the text. Criticisms of negation strategies, by implying that images already 'made' and their meanings secured within the institutions of patriarchal culture are somehow beyond this kind of intervention, are retaining the theoretical effects of an idealist theory of meaning-production, in which the relationship between a concept and its 'image' is deemed 'natural' or inevitable.

Why is it assumed that, by countering patriarchal representations with women's knowledges of the world, negation is naively realist? It is not a question of challenging the 'false' with the 'true', but of demonstrating the gender-specific nature of experience and knowledge. The imposition of these motives makes it more difficult, rather than less, to construct feminist readings of this work.

My reasons for choosing celebration and negation as examples of strategies which are being 'squeezed out' by deconstruction, and for arguing that this is wrong, are that they seem to me to have unexploited potential for addressing women as an audience (a potential lacking in deconstruction). Both represent some attempt to encourage ideological identifications between women as the consumers in certain processes of representation, by privileging the feminine reader through an emphasis on women's experience. I appreciate that the concept of 'women's experience' is vague and contradictory but this is an imperative to carry out further work rather than to abandon the whole notion as too difficult to approach. Celebration and negation are audience-orientated because they subordinate the text, as text, to its function (representing the ideological interests of women as a dominated social group). The text is not given the status of 'a representation', but of a symbol of the processes of representation, so that its formal existence is only one of the conditions of its meaningfulness. This seems to me to be a necessary aspiration for a practice which claims to adopt a materialist approach to culture, since it defines production as a practice rather than an effect of textuality.

A common assumption of the critics of celebration and negation is that feminist art must construct a 'new' language with which to articulate radical meanings. Here the text, the relationship between its formal elements, is afforded a position as the determinant of meaning which, in any given instance of meaning-production, it never attains. From this perspective, the audience figures only as a group of initiates familiar with the range of textual moves which have been undertaken, rather than as providing the conditions under which those textual moves can carry significance.

Deconstruction in feminist art.

Deconstructive strategies are based on a theory of meanings as the productions of texts. Emphasis is laid on the means of representation, but these means are reduced to the language of texts, so that texts are deemed to provide their own determining conditions of reading and meaningfulness.

Mary Kelly's work, for example, 'stresses the fact that the production of the subject is primarily a question of positionality in language'.³⁰ The aim is to encourage a 'critical distance' between viewer and text, so that this 'positionality' is displaced, and meaning is 'deconstructed'. Examples can also be found in the work of Marie Yates, Yve Lomax, Sarah McCarthy, Martha Rosler, Judith Barry and others.

Deconstruction as a textual strategy is not confined to feminist art. (Indeed it is the means by which artistic 'revolutions' have taken place throughout the history of modernism). But it has become widespread in feminist art because of certain theories of femininity now associated with it. These derive from theories of language and the subject originating in post-Freudian psychoanalysis. The work of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray has been instrumental in the dissemination of these theories.

Briefly, the argument is that a 'feminine' relation to language is characterized by 'process' and 'heterogeneity', whereas a masculine relation is fixed and homogenous, it therefore threatens to subvert the meanings of patriarchal discourses by placing subjectivity 'in process' and transforming the moment of reading into one where meanings are set 'in play' rather than fixed. However, this 'feminine relation' has nothing to do with being a woman, because a woman's relation to a text usually involves identifying with a masculine viewing subject.³¹

So-called classic-realist texts (Hollywood films are notoriously exemplary) set up this masculine relation, constructing 'ideological' (patriarchal) subjects as a result. By contrast, deconstructive texts encourage a heterogenous, or 'feminine' relation, thereby 'unfixing' this ideological subject. The difference between the two is provided by their formal existence, their modes of textual organization.

Claims that deconstruction represents a break from idealist epistemology are based on a critique of 'logocentrism' (metaphysical relations whereby concepts appear to be 'present' in representations. These relations function through series of oppositions in which one term - the logos - is deemed superior to the other e.g. spiritual vs. material, natural vs. cultural, masculine vs. feminine, etc. In this way the world is 'ordered', made sense of, meanings and values are generated). Logocentric thought can, thus, conceive of a 'reality' which is opposed to an 'imaginary', an 'objective' to a 'subjective', a 'literal' to a 'metaphysical', and so on. As a consequence, some representations are described as scientific, objective, naturalistic, etc., and others as artistic, subjective and metaphorical.

Deconstruction seeks to demonstrate that these oppositions are constructions, and that supposedly 'objective' representations only appear so because their textuality is effaced through a process by which its formal conventions appear 'transparent' and its texts achieve a 'realist' status. All representations (including verbal, and even thought itself) are textual, it is claimed, therefore the ways in which some are elevated above others as reflecting or expressing truth must be contractual rather than inevitable.

There are several problems here, which I will go into further in the next section, involving a series of reductive moves. A process (representation) is reduced to an object (the text), a network of material circumstances (discourse) is reduced to an abstract, formal system (language), consequently the opposition between the 'real' and the 'imaginary', for example, is seen as not only contractual, but somehow meaningless or without effects.

In order to explain how logocentric thought is reproduced in the individual subject, a theory of the entry into language (into the 'symbolic order') has been developed using Lacanian psychoanalysis. A 'signifying practice' is the setting in place of a system of signs requiring the identity of a speaking subject. Very briefly, this subject is the product of a series of events tracing the development of the psyche, involving the 'mis-recognition' of the self (making future identification with others possible), and the entry into the symbolic which accompanies this first articulation of the 'I' of subjectivity.³² The symbolic order of Western patriarchy gives primacy of signification to the phallus, hence the masculine subjectivity is the 'ideal ego'. So if women are to make sense of patriarchal representations, identification with the masculine subjectivity is required. Therefore, the desires which women bring to each viewing/reading experience derive from their lack of the phallus.³³

Thus logocentrism is inevitably phallogocentrism, a concept combining patriarchal authority, unity of meaning, and certainty of origin. This is why the term 'feminine', in the discourses of deconstruction, refers to any force which disrupts or subverts the meanings of the symbolic order. Any language which prioritizes 'process' above homogeneity, the semiotic³⁴ above the symbolic, becomes a 'dynamic' signifying practice as opposed to a 'stabilizing' one. The 'feminine' and 'women's experience' are distinguished in this way.

Deconstruction aspires to be a dynamic signifying practice, 'a form of anarchism which will express in behaviour and in action the discourses of the historical avant-garde: the destruction of the traditional western subject'.³⁵ It is the need for such a practice which, according to Kristeva, is the main problem of feminism.

Deconstruction involves making 'plural' or 'writable'³⁶ texts which demand active reading (as a result of 'critical distance'), in contrast to the realist or 'readable' texts of dominant (stabilising) signifying practices which, it is argued, demand 'passive consumption'. This is achieved by various strategies, usually involving bringing textuality to the surface, making texts refer to themselves, to reveal the 'productivity' of language. The formal properties and relations of the text become its own subject-matter, and in this way the distinctions between writing and reading, between artistic and critical practices, are 'displaced'. The purpose is not, however, to produce a 'feminist' text, because political tendentiousness involves a degree of textual closure which is anathema to the deconstructive project, rather it is to produce an alternative 'thrill', a 'jouissance'³⁷ which replaces the old pleasures of passive consumption. The alternative pleasure results from 'transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire'.³⁸

This aesthetics of transgression is common to all avant-gardes, ensuring that strategies are always determined, through relations of symmetrical opposition, by the very (dominant) forms they claim to challenge. Modernism* is the other side of the coin to Realism* (where both are conceived in terms of modes of textual organisation), they define each other by being what the other is not: they are complementary aspects of the same formalist approach. The apparent contradiction is embedded in the very means by which cultural hegemony is secured and maintained.

This explains why Western capitalism has succeeded in putting modernist art to various uses (in cultural imperialism or cold war politics, for example). This is also why male artists have consistently managed to produce meanings which depend on a 'feminine' relation to the text, and why the avant-garde continue to occupy an 'alternative space'³⁹ in relation to the mainstream, even finding this a cause for self-congratulation rather than self criticism.⁴⁰

This blindness, to the ways in which artistic 'independence' naturalise 'good taste' within a hierarchy of aesthetic pleasures, is what makes avant-gardism so inappropriate for feminist art. The transgressional (or subcultural) position is occupied by the romantic 'outsider', a modern ideology of masculinity.⁴¹ The ambiguous and uneasy relationship which women artists have tended to have with avant-garde movements is evidence of this.⁴² Avant-gardism is an intellectual field defined by the 'creative project' which outlives any individual manifestation of it. Homage is paid to the intrinsic value of this every time a new 'heresy' emerges and succeeds in dethroning the current

*Though the former is often based on a critique of the latter, (see p.19) both assume that there is a representable 'reality' beyond the 'illusions' of a mediated world.

orthodoxy. There is an underlying complicity between the contenders then, their relationship is one of competitive complementarity between 'champions' and 'challengers'. The stakes, it is agreed, are worth fighting for, they are the social resources specific to the field, i.e. the power to legitimate and consecrate aesthetic experiences.

In order to engage in this competition, however, certain knowledges (cultural capital) have to be invested in the field. Knowledges, as feminists must insist, are gender-specific, but those demanded by this field are specifically artistic competences claiming to be un-gendered, and therefore must be masculine. These competences provide the basis for the 'critical distance' required for deconstructive reading/writing. This critical distance is an 'aesthetic disposition' in which (it is claimed) formal relations, in and by themselves, become the generator of meanings and values. This aesthetic disposition makes possible the claim to economic disinterest - the 'disavowal of economic necessity'⁴³ which is at the heart of the field and provides the foundation for bourgeois hegemony (because middle-class taste can appear as 'naturally' superior). This contrasts sharply with strategies in which the text's subordination to its ideological function is acknowledged, as with celebration and negation.

Formalism and Materialism

Deconstruction's claim to challenge realism, like all avant-gardes' claims to be 'materialist', are based on a theoretical reduction of discourses (which are concrete, motivated, worldly, institutionalized social relations) to languages (abstract, unmotivated systems of difference), and therefore of the material (productive practices) to the formal (level of technology).

This explains why deconstruction has to maintain a distinction between those texts which enable productive reading, and those (realist) ones which defy deconstruction and supposedly maintain the reader in a passive position. (So texts are pre-given after all. How does this account differ from idealist theories of meaning-production?) It also explains why deconstruction has to maintain some notion of a privileged subject position where artistic practices are concerned. Not just anyone can be deconstructive, it all depends on the extent to which the semiotic can filter through the symbolic. Artists may not be born but they nevertheless emerge through the oedipal phase which occurs at a very early age. The accumulation of class and gender specific educational and cultural capital, after this climax in the psychoanalytic narrative, pales into insignificance.

Formalism is an idealist tradition. From Bell (1913)* and Fry (1920)* to Greenberg (1947)* and Fried, (1966)* it is defined above all in opposition to the material, the social, the experiential, the worldly. It has always been committed to the maintenance of art as an autonomous realm of knowledge-production. It is not as a result of the influence of materialism that art resists capitalization and the demands of a market economy.^{LL} On the contrary, this is absolutely compatible with a modern (romantic) idealism where only art can transcend the restrictions of the material world. For modernist/deconstructive artists to claim that their work is materialist on the grounds that it is about the means of the production is to mistake one of those means (language) for the totality. It is an over-simplification of the marxist de-mystification of idealist thought.

Althusserian concepts of ideology, the subject, and reproduction, are often referred to in support of deconstruction. Yet the two are incompatible in my view. The development from structuralism to post-structuralism (which advocates deconstructionist strategies) via semiology, depends, I would argue, on a particular reading of Althusser which is controversial.

Structuralism is about social relations and practices, not formal relations and texts. It is a theory of the conditions of intelligibility which positions the reader at the centre of the production of meaning, as the point at which the text achieves some unity, can signify. It is an investigation of a text's relations to structures and processes. Structures are present in the text only to the extent that formal conventions are collectively recognized. They are the (shared) competences which make readings possible. Competences are always specific to the reader and his/her position within various sets of social relations. Therefore, the meaningfulness of the text is dependent on the degree to which it is invested with ideological functions, made to refer to a specific but not pre-signified experience of the world ('reality') and become 'vraisemblable' (become a relation of the intertextuality which makes it intelligible). The production of meaning does not occur at the abstract level of textual difference,

.....
 * Prime examples of modernist theory, which continue to heavily influence both the teaching and criticism of art.

but at the concrete level of practice (reading) at which signifiers become 'motivated'. This is what defines structuralism as a materialist approach, not attention to the formal existence of codes and conventions in the text, **but** attention to reading as a material practice which transforms the text into an intelligible object by giving it an ideological function.

Althusser's concept of 'relative autonomy' refers to the ways in which the economic 'base' (mode of production) confers a dominant role on another (ideological) level of the social formation. But:

the mode of production is ... conceptualized as consisting, neither as economic relations per se, nor of anything so vulgarly material as "level of technology" but as a combination of relations social relations themselves progressively become "a productive force" ... (for) theoretical fields and discourses.⁴⁵

Determination (of ideology by practice) involves a structural, rather than sequential, causality. Materialism is defined not as a crude reversal of idealist thought, but a de-mystification in which both the terms of the dialectic and the relationship between them are revised. So:

on the one hand, determination in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production; on the other, the relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific effectivity. This clearly breaks with the Hegelian theme of phenomena-essence-truth-of. We are really dealing with a new relationship between new terms.⁴⁶

An idealist dialectic is the product of a 'simple truth' whereas a materialist dialectic is 'overdetermined'.

But post-structuralist semiology⁴⁷ and advocates of deconstruction have re-established a sequential causality, a 'simple truth', by addressing the problem of ideology in terms of the reproduction of the subject, rather than of social relations. It is claimed that 'Ideology produces the individual in relation to representation within the social processes in which he or she is situated, as an identity'.⁴⁸ This is the result of the reduction of productive practices (and their institutional contexts) to languages (of representation). Althusser's materialism depends on an understanding of ideology as an instance of the social formation, and an understanding that there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, whereas in the post-structuralist reading the theoretical effects of **idealist** concepts remain active because this determination (of ideology by practice) is not in evidence. The outcome is a 'dominance orientated' theory of meaning-production, where reproduction can only be interrupted by deconstructive (avant-garde) practices.

The specific effectivity of the superstructures, and the relative autonomy of the processes of representation, are reduced in deconstruction to the 'productivity of language'. The effects of this can be seen in attempts to separate 'realist' modes of representation from deconstructive representation which, by acknowledging its own textuality, supposedly breaks with idealist epistemology. This position tries to argue that 'realism' is an effect of textuality, that the source-of-representation (institutions, practices) does not exist independently of the text, or that the relationship between them is arbitrary. While realism may be defined at the level of signification (see p. above, reference to the 'vraisemblable'), signification is a function not only of language but of all the means of representation, including the productive force which is social relations. Thus, while

there is no simple correspondence between classes at the economic level and classes as social forces constituted at the political and ideological planes ... neither is the connection accidental and arbitrary. What relates them is a process of representation, properly understood, in which a representation of the one is produced at the other distinct and "relatively autonomous" levels.⁴⁹

The connection is always motivated, as I have already argued, in specific competences located beyond linguistic systems of representation in social relations themselves.

What has become known as the 'Screen' critique of realism (which proposes that a) realism interpellates individuals as coherent subjects 'in thrall to the text' and b) this is achieved via textual operations of the signifying practice which exceeds any reading) 'makes the analysis of specific texts produced and consumed in concrete, historical circumstances difficult, if not impossible'.⁵⁰ Realism is not a mode of textual organization, it describes the particular place which a text occupies (within discourse) by virtue of the circumstances it is given in specific readings. The 'represented' is not equated with a pre-signified 'reality', nor is it equated with the 'representation'. The text has a specific situation in relation to the apparatuses of reading (the site of competences) which determine how, when, why and to whom it appears 'realist' (or anything else). The text is implicated in actuality by historical and ideological (as well as formal) circumstances. This means that as a text (with internal relations distinct from external forces) it is a unity which is contingent, circumstantial. 'The multiplicity of codes which make up the work is focussed in the very historical conjuncture in which ^{it} is delivered'.⁵¹ The production of feminist meanings therefore requires more than the elaboration of a particular (deconstructive) mode of textual organization, but a negotiation

of the text's insertion within the discursive limits of a specific conjuncture (at the points of production, distribution, and consumption.)

Women as an audience - conclusion.

This article is in part a plea for a feminist art which is accessible to, and pleasurable for, women. But what does this mean? It suggests the need to prioritize feminine knowledges and competences, feminine desire, since these are the means by which objects can signify and be meaningful for women and represent their relation to, or interests in, the world. Feminism is the representation of these interests.

This raises certain difficulties about what feminine experience (from which knowledges and competences derive) is, or indeed what femininity is. There have been attempts made by feminists to separate femaleness from femininity in order to try to explain how, for instance, a cultural object both addresses a gender-specific audience (already formed as it were) and at the same time contributes to the 'gendering' of the viewer.⁵³ I see no need to draw such a distinction. Gendering processes never end; a feminine subject is never completely 'formed'. For an individual to be maintained in a feminine subject-position, she has to experience continually the reality of being feminine. Every encounter with a cultural object must be able to confirm and re-affirm the gender of the subject. It may seem obvious that patriarchal society has an interest in ensuring that this process continues, but the reproduction of gender relations, on which patriarchy depends, requires a great deal more than this. Gendering processes, per se, are not intrinsically oppressive or exploitative; the domination of women depends not on ideologies of femininity but on the reproduction of gender relations, which cannot take place outside the institutional contexts which give those relations meaning and consequences. Feminine taste represents women's desire to be addressed as feminine subjects, and this is evidence of their shared cultural identity not their oppression. It is not as if there were a residual 'femaleness' to turn to instead.

For artists to mobilize a concept of feminine knowledge strikes a blow at the very justification for art's claim to disinterest (to transcend the social), which is its production of 'universal' values. Moreover, that art should continue to occupy such a de-socialized sphere is necessary for the reproduction of social relations in a climate of constant technological and mass-cultural change. How else might a concept of dominance continue to make sense in the face of the possibilities offered by modern technology?

Concepts of feminine desire have suffered most from the idealist notion of desire-as-acquisition (the making good of a lack), where acquisition is defined in opposition to loss. Psychoanalytic theory has placed the surveillance and control of feminine desire at the centre of social reproduction; through its preservation of the family in the wake of industrialization, it has enabled the survival of dominance through gender. This moralized discourse of mental pathology has, more than anything else, provided the conditions under which feminine knowledge has been made visible/readable as fantasy. Consequently attempts to use the concepts of gendering offered in psychoanalysis, by feminists, results in circular arguments in which women's desires are seen simply as a passive response to the empty promise of 'completion' offered by ideologies of femininity.⁵⁴ Femininity is reduced to passivity, feminine desire is reduced to a predictable response to patriarchal power. According to this, feminism itself might also be seen as a huge male conspiracy.

These issues have serious implications for our understanding of women as an audience. It has been deemed necessary to maintain a spurious distinction between 'the social act of consuming', and the moment when consumers 'engage in the processes and pleasures of meaning-making attendant on watching a film or a T.V. programme', so that a concept of 'interpellation' (deriving from psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity) can be preserved. This distinction between 'audience' and 'spectator' involves a further separation of the context of watching T.V. (which has to insert itself into the discourses of domesticity/familial relations) and the context of cinema-going (which, it is argued, involves looking 'in a more pristine way' at the image). To suggest that women watching films are subject to cinematic 'regimes' of pleasure whereby they are 'constructed' as gendered spectators rather than that the film inserts itself into the discourses of feminine experience (at home, 'work', leisure, etc.) is unacceptable. It is simply a way of maintaining the object of film within the domain of literary criticism. Moreover, it colludes with the representation of women's desires as contradictory fantasies of masculinization and masochism.

If concerns with women-as-an-audience are to get beyond token acknowledgements of the need to see both context and reading practices as productive, followed by a series of qualifications which allows everything to continue as before, these (psychoanalysis-informed) concepts of feminine desire/knowledge must be replaced. For an object to become a repository for meaning and pleasure (or un-pleasure) for women, it must undergo a process in which a series of investments (of women's competences) are made, so that women's desire becomes

a condition of its meaningfulness, and knowledge (of the place of the feminine within the social) is produced, (contributing to the accumulation of feminine competences in the viewer).

There is no need to look for a 'new language' with which to articulate feminine meanings. These investments are continually being made and remade at the point at which cultural objects are inserted within the discursive relations of women's lives. That women's pleasures are not redeemable (as cultural capital) in the context of legitimate (patriarchal) institutions, such as education, the media, the family, the art-world, is a function of hegemony not a product of language. Hegemony is the rationalization of dominance, in relation to which feminine desire often asserts itself as a de-rationalizing impulse. Women's 'obsessions', with their bodies for example, inhibit their subordination as often as they facilitate it. Women take pleasure, they are not given it. Women can turn anything into an object of desire in order to experience pleasure, and it is the latter which is at stake not the former. Women's use of 'fashion' for example, to structure their tastes, runs counter to the individual/universal dualism of patriarchal discourses, creating identifications and difference at the same time. The tension between the conditions of existence and these dominated pleasures is a constant threat to hegemony.

Intervention in the reproduction of gender relations then, must increase this tension by addressing the knowledge/values produced by women's commodity-consumption as specifically feminine. For art this involves its dissociation from the pursuit of intrinsic value (feminist or otherwise) and an engagement with the contingencies, however transitory, of women's social position now.

As well as being an argument for a feminist art for a feminine audience, this article is also intended as one against avant-gardism. Popular distaste for 'form-over-function' (or looking 'in a more pristine way') is no accident or whim. Avant-gardism is always necessarily recruited to defend art's claim to disinterest, without which relations of domination and subordination could not continue to make sense in contemporary society.

Notes

1. G. Parker and R. Pollock, Old Mistresses (1981). See ch. 3 for an account of how the opposition 'woman vs artist' has structured artistic discourses since the renaissance.
2. 'Feministo' (1975) was a 'post art' project involving women all over the country, 'Mother's Pride Mother's Ruin' (1978) was an exhibition of photographs, films and installations by Tricia Davis and Phil Goodall, 'The Dinner Party' (1979) was an installation attributed to Judy Chicago but worked on by dozens of women in California and exhibited recently (1985) in London.
3. Examples include 'Issue' and 'Women's Images of Men' (at the ICA, 1980, the latter toured), 'Sense and Sensibility' (at the Midland Group, Nottingham, 1982) and more recently 'Pandora's Box' at the Arnolfini, Bristol (and touring) in June, 1984.
4. T. Davis, and P. Goodall, 'Personally and Politically' in Feminist Review No. 1 (1979) pp 21-35.
5. See for example G. Pollock, 'Vision, Voice and Power' in Block No. 6 (1982) pp. 2-21 and Lippard, 'The Women's Art Movement - What Next?' in From the Center (1976) pp. 139-148.
6. M. Barrett, 'Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics' in Feminism, Culture and Politics (1982) pp. 37-58.
7. J. Barry, and S. Flitterman, 'Textual Strategies' in Screen Vol. 21 No. 2 (1980) pp. 35-46.
8. R. Coward, 'This Novel Changes Lives' in Feminist Review No. 5 (1980) pp. 53-63. See also Duncan, C. 'When Greatness is a Box of Wheaties' in Art Forum, October 1975. pp. 60-64.
9. G. Pollock, Introduction to Sense and Sensibility catalogue (1982).
10. Barrett, op. cit.
11. See, for example, E. Cowie, 'The Popular Film as a Progressive Text - a discussion of "Coma"' in m/f Nos. 3 pp 59-81 and 4 pp. 57-69 (1979 & 80) where a spurious distinction is made between texts which have their meaning constituted in their insertion within a series of discourses, and those which provide their own determining conditions of reading and meaningfulness.
12. Barry, and Flitterman, op. cit.
13. Barrett, op. cit.
14. Barry and Flitterman op. cit.
15. Ibid
16. Barrett, op. cit.
17. Coward, op. cit.
18. Rosler, 'The Private and the Public' in Art Forum September 1977.

19. Barrett, op. cit.
20. Coward, op. cit.
21. See G. Pollock 'Feminism, Femininity and the Hayward Annual' in Feminist Review No. 2. (1979) pp. 33-54
22. J. Berger, Ways of Seeing (1972) p. 47.
23. L. Tickner, Introduction to catalogue for 'Women's Images of Men' (1980).
24. G. Pollock, (1982) op.cit.
25. L. Tickner, op. cit.
26. For some examples, see J. Posener, Spray it Loud (1982).
27. G. Pollock, 'What's Wrong With Images of Women?'. Screen Education No. 24 (1977). pp. 25-34
28. Barry and Flitterman, op. cit.
29. J. Ryland, 'Feminist Graffiti of Adverts' Feminist Art News No. 6 (1982) p. 5.
30. Mary Kelly, quoted in the catalogue for Sense and Sensibility (1982).
31. See A. Kuhn, Women's Pictures (1982) pp. 11-13 for a more detailed account.
32. See J. Kristeva, 'Signifying Practice and Mode of Production' Edinburgh Magazine No. 1 (1976) pp. 64-75.
33. See L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Screen Vol. 16 No. 3 (1975) pp 6-18
34. Kristeva's term for the pre-lingual realm of sounds, rythms, gestures etc., which are anterior to meaning.
35. J. Kristeva, from interview in L'Espresso April 1977.
36. Jacques Derrida's term, see J. Culler, On Deconstruction (1983) Routledge pp. 88-110.
37. R. Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, (1975).
38. L. Mulvey, op. cit.
39. S. Harvey, 'Independent Cinema?' Independent Video No. 1 (1981)
40. As Peter Wollen does in Readings and Writings (1982) p. 214.
41. See A. McRobbie, 'Settling accounts with Subcultures, a feminist critique' Screen Education No. 34 (1980). pp. 37-49
42. As referred to in Parker and Pollock, op. cit. (1981) pp. 134-157.
See also Joyce Johnson's Minor Characters (1983) for a personal account.
43. P. Bourdieu 'Aristocracy of Culture'. Media, Culture and Society Vol. 2 No. 3 (1980) pp 225-254.

44. See B. Miese, 'The Cultural Commodity' Media, Culture and Society Vol. 1 No. 3 (1979) pp. 297 - 311.
45. S. Hall, 'Re-thinking the "Base and Superstructure" metaphor', Class, Hegemony, Party (1977) ed. J. Bloomfield, (1977) pp 43-72
46. L. Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' in For Marx (1969) pp 87-128.
47. Eg V. Burgin, 'Looking at Photographs' in Screen Education No. 24 (1977) pp. 17-24.
48. R. Coward, and J. Ellis, Language and Materialism (1977)
49. J. Tagg, 'The Currency of the Photograph' Screen Education No. 28 (1978) pp. 45-67.
50. D. Hebdige, and G. Hurd, 'Reading and Realism' Screen Education No. 28 (1978) pp. 68-78
51. J. Tagg, op. cit.
52. N. Green and F. Mort 'Visual Representations and Cultural Politics' Block No. 7 (1982) pp. 59-68
53. A. Kuhn, 'Women's Genres' Screen Vol. 25 (1984) pp 18-28
54. For example, R. Coward, Female Desire (1984)
55. Kuhn op. cit. (1984).