

Feminist Object(ive)s: Writing Feminist Art Histories

Tuesday 21st May 2013
University of York

The aims of this workshop were to foster discussion on the formation of feminist art histories. To foreground this interchange, six invited speakers also presented 20 minute 'position' papers which articulated how feminism had come to intersect with their research. The speakers were Harriet Riches (Kingston University), Hilary Robinson (Middlesex), Henrietta Stanford (Courtauld Institute of Art), Sylvie Simonds (McGill), James Boaden (University of York) and Catherine Grant (Goldsmiths). In this report I will briefly discuss the papers in relation to the panels and note some of the themes of the roundtable discussion at the end the session.

The first session of the workshop titled 'Absences and presences writing art history with slippery figures' focused on the problem of doing history outside dominant narratives. In each of the three papers the 'slippery figure' was both a source of creative potential and anxiety. For Harriet Riches, whose paper 'Nothing to See: Making Meaning from the Writing of Photography in the Feminine' asked what was the reality of the female photographer at the turn of the century? Articulating a feminisation in the discourse of photography, particularly at the level of the camera as a consumer object, Riches then noted the absence of women's real experience of photography in the archives. Citing Joan W. Scott, Riches proposed this lack as the result of the social construction of woman as absence but sought to go beyond this to interrogate the 'specific construction' of the category 'woman' through archival investigation, asking questions of who, why, how and when. The absent figure in photographic history allows for a new understanding of the ideological construction of gender for both the past and the present.

The second paper in the panel, 'Actionmyth, Historypanic: The Entry of VALIE EXPORT's *Aktionhose: Genitalpanik* into Art History' took up the problem of historicising the most slippery of mediums, performance. Hilary Robinson's paper was a declaration of the importance of archival research to challenge the mythologies of performance, root the remainders of performance in the reality of the event and as such move towards a better understanding of political context of the work. Robinson's case study, Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT's 1968 performance *Aktionhose: Genitalpanik*, exposed the pervasive mythologizing of the artwork in art history. By piercing this mythology, Robinson sought to disperse the categorisation of EXPORT's work as 'bad-girl feminism' and move towards a consideration of multiple issues such as the 'exposure of the body in public', 'the entry of the female sexed body into art history' and the 'connotations of a woman carrying a gun' in 60's Vienna.

The archival anxiety evident in both Riches' and Robinson's papers was approached differently by the third paper in the session, Henrietta Stanford's 'Staying Anxious: Encountering Ulrike Meinhof in Silvia Kolbowski's *A Few Howls Again?*'. Analysing the return to the past evident in Kolbowski's reanimation of the Red Army Faction's most infamous member, Stanford's paper alluded to a more general retrospection in contemporary art. In contrast to Robinson's attention to a depoliticisation in re-enactment, Stanford argued for an anxious-subject position that had the potential to hold both past and present a 'watchfulness, critical alert... staying in relation to history without being bound to it'. In Stanford's psychoanalytic retelling Meinhof becomes the puppet for Kolbowski's anxiety of powerlessness, a 'ghost' of history 'refusing to lie

down', it is a signal of the creative potential of the past to help us think again about the present.

In the second session of the day, 'Reframed: sexuality, sensuality and Queer Histories' the anxiety of the first session was displaced by a more playful temporality. Sylvie Simonds' paper 'A Window for Stan Brakhage' approached Carolee Schneemann's 1960s performance and video works not as a purely proto-feminist disengagement with a masculine art world but through the real relationships the artist had with other makers and particularly the filmmaker Stan Brakhage and his wife Jane. Looking again at the work of both Schneemann and the Brakhages through their dialogue, Simonds proposed a new reading of the painted elements evident in many of Schneemann's 60s performance work in relation to the superimposition and layering of images in Brakhage's *Dog Star Man*. The result of this nuanced understanding of collaboration evidenced a more complicated understanding of the gender politics of both Schneemann and Brakhage's work.

James Boaden's paper, 'Lesbian Separatism and the Erotic in the Work and Reception of the Films of Barbara Hammer' also demanded a re-reading more alive to the reality of the work's production. Beginning from the present and the queer temporality of a number of film works that quote, cite or star Hammer, Boaden argued for the liberating potential of films such as AL Steiner and AK Burns' *Community Action Centre* to make the 'history they would have liked to have been'. However, he notes the particular interpretation of history that these works create, in the case of *Community Action Centre* a lesbian erotic tied to separatism. Yet, Hammer's revolutionary lesbian erotic films were not produced in a separatist environment, rather Hammer participated in the larger context of film production at San Francisco State where she met and engaged with the work of filmmakers such as James Broughton and Stan Brakhage. In this light Boaden proposed a reading of Hammer that encompasses a wider context and a broader attention to gender and sexuality in her work.

The final paper of the session was Catherine Grant's 'Re-enacting Histories: Boudry/Lorenz's *Salomania*'. Returning to problem of re-enactment, interrogated in the first session, Grant provided a more positive and productive reading which foregrounded the passionate and creative aspects of quotation and appropriation. Re-thinking a relationship to history through 'fan scholarship', Grant offered a queered model of art writing which allows for the simultaneous presence and engagement of different generations and temporalities. Her analysis of Boudry & Lorenz's film work *Salomania* demonstrated the latent creativity of the pedagogical experience through the performances of Yvonne Rainer and Wu Tsang who circle between the characters of master and mistress, Herod and Salome, teacher and pupil, Rainer and Tsang. Staging the gesture as a fulcrum point of continuity, identity whirl across gender boundaries, history, age, generations and professional status.