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DIÁLOGOS ENTRE EL SEXO,
LA CLASE Y LA VIOLENCIA

DIALOGUES BETWEEN SEX,
CLASS AND VIOLENCE

MARGARET HARRISON

HALL 01. THE REVERSED GAZE, HIERARCHY OF SEXES AND STEREOTYPES

Combining activism and art, Margaret Harrison and several other artists formed The London Women's Liberation Art Group in 1970. In their determination to take art to the streets first, and then to bring the streets into the galleries, Harrison and her colleagues did a series of performances under the auspices of the feminist movement. They joined the protest against the Miss World Contest, denouncing the hierarchy between the sexes and the stereotypes that limit identities of sex, gender, and sexuality. During those years, feminism identified sex as the material base on which the system of oppression of women is constructed: a system that is not immanent, but rather historical and changing. Harrison's first solo exhibition a year later involved a series of drawings and paintings that questioned those stereotypes, emphasizing how they objectified women and reproduced masculine domination. In a strict operation of visual-sexual symmetry, the artist had created reversal images by applying to men the same parameters of representation that were used for women. The exhibition, which offered a critique on the iconography of the consumer society and American pop art, was deemed 'indecent' and shut down by the police 24 hours after it was inaugurated. However, this brief time sufficed for her work of Hugh Hefner as a Playboy bunny to be stolen from the gallery. Surprisingly, it was not the female representations that motivated the closure, but the male ones (such as that of Hefner), which had been equally hyper-sexualized using a novel and feminist 'reversed gaze'.

HALL 02. INTERSECTIONS OF SEX AND CLASS. THE WORK OF WOMEN

Though sex and class are intersecting categories, that relationship was scarcely addressed in the British art of the 1970s. From the beginning of her career, Margaret Harrison stands out precisely for articulating a feminist perspective in which class and sex occupy a central place. This interest led her, along with Kay Hunt and Mary Kelly, to form the Women's Workshop within the Artists' Union in 1972. Alongside their interest in wage differences between the sexes, they demanded positions of influence within the Union itself. This allowed them to experiment for the first time with public speaking and decision-making, activities traditionally reserved for males. Soon after, the three artists did a study on the work of women in a metal box factory in Bermondsey, London, and presented their findings in the installation *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-1975*, at the South London Gallery in 1975. The exhibition combined Harrison and Hunt's interviews of the women workers with information about the factory that the three artists had gathered from archives or through their own observations. This combination of sociological perspectives and subjective visions led to a series of reflections on changes in work conditions and industry resulting from the Equal Pay Act (EPA) that had been approved in the United Kingdom in 1970. During those years, as fledgling feminist theory affirmed the connection between public and private spheres, some feminists demanded a salary for homemakers. They thought of the domestic space, the home, as a place in which social and biological reproduction occurred and in which working-class women also produced for industry. Harrison projected the idea as a backdrop for another work on women and labour, the solo exhibition *Homeworkers* (1977). She used the method developed in the prior work to explore the difficulties of female workers who produced in their homes. British businessmen had adapted quickly to the EPA by transferring the worst-paid tasks to the night shifts, degrading work, and forcing many women to work at home because it became difficult even to get to the factory. With *Homeworkers*, Harrison set herself at a distance from the elitist tics found in certain sectors of British conceptual art. Materialist artistic praxis, she insisted, consists of 'working with the actual evidence and the way it affects people's material existence, i.e. not just one's own experience of the examination of language/Linguistics only, which can result in disappearing up one's own backside'.

HALL 03. VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Parallel to the reflection on labour exploitation, Harrison produced a series of iconic works on the sexual exploitation that women suffer. It included another recurrent theme throughout her career: violence, and specifically violence against women. Harrison saw the oppression and exploitation of women as part of a complex framework of sex, class, and race that is sustained by violence. From her feminist perspective, the limitations surrounding these categories were maintained through the exercise of symbolic and physical violence against women. In *Anonymous Was a Woman* (1977/1992), the artist plays with an idea from Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929): namely that throughout history female authorship has frequently been hidden behind the label 'anonymous'. Harrison brought together the lives of eight women who had made important contributions to culture in the last two centuries. Six of them had died violently, either assassinated for trespassing beyond the limits assigned to their sex or because they were unable to bear the social and psychological strain. In *Rape* (1978), Harrison specifically addresses this form of violence against women, contrasting the feelings of the victims with the social and institutional numbness that prevails when it comes to doing justice, even in the face of irrefutable proof. The social entrenchment of rape is highlighted through portraits of everyday objects commonly used as weapons for violation. The work insists that this sexual ideology is found and reproduced in all spheres, including Art History. Between violence and sexual exploitation of women, we find the *Craftwork* project (1980), in which the artist laments the loss of qualified know-how practiced by homemakers – embroidery, sewing, knitting and other handicrafts – as industry completely took over the production of goods. During the gruelling industrial crisis of the 1970s in the United Kingdom, many working-class women were obliged to become street prostitutes. They would take the train to 'work' away from their neighbourhoods in order to return home with a little cash.

HALL 04. RADICAL WRITING

The irruption of feminist art on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1970s provoked a reaction in the early 1980s from the artistic establishment, which attempted to minimise the movement by denouncing it as excessively political and tied to a precise moment in history. Coinciding with these reactions, Harrison produced work that extols radical writing in response to the dominant narratives and renders tribute to writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth or Rosa Luxemburg. These works re-examine the enlightened origins of feminist thinking and how it relates to other areas of critical thought, such as socialism, and the political dimensions of apparently neutral topics such as nature or the earth.

In *Politics and the Beauty of Words* (1984) Harrison recovers radical female writers from the past and portrays them alongside the men with whom they maintained an intellectual relationship, emphasising that ideas do not belong to a single individual. Despite what the author-genius culture would have us believe, artists and writers have never worked alone. Rather, it is the relationships between individuals that foster intellectual and artistic creation and advancement. In this work, Harrison also suggests that women haven't always been relegated to a secondary role in these relationships, nor did feminism spring from a vacuum. Rather, it emerged as part of a complex historical, social and cultural process. *Singing Roses* (1985-2012), a series composed of two bodies of work, is a tribute to Rosa Luxemburg. It addresses the intersection of feminism and socialism, emphasising that the fight for equality between the sexes cannot be separated from the fight for equality among human beings, or vice versa. The first body of work is composed of three drawings depicting the socialist symbol of the rose and the fist. Each drawing is surrounded by the same text, which emerges along four axes to schematically depict the artist's method: radical art practice, activism, socialism and theory. The second body of work combats stereotypical definitions of socialism by suggesting different approaches to the concept. Its four individual pieces showcase texts and portraits of Rosa Luxemburg alongside present-day women. There is another Rosa, a daughter of the artist, paired with a text by British feminist theorist Jean McCrindle. The *Dorothy Wordsworth* (1982) series is a tribute to that English writer, in which Harrison maintains that land and land ownership are still pressing political issues. Paintings of plants as metaphors for the earth are accompanied by fragments from Wordsworth's diaries, which describe the poverty she saw all around her in nineteenth-century northern England. This new type of poverty was caused by land expropriation that coincided with the demand for workers in young industrial cities such as Manchester and Liverpool. In Harrison's series *Land/Landscape: Australia/England* (1982), she expands on the topic of land and landscape, having confirmed that the techniques used to expropriate communal land in the United Kingdom were transferred to Australia under colonial rule. The indigenous communities living there, whose concept of belonging to the land was bound to its conservation, believed that the white intruders did not respect the land because they did not know it. These aboriginal communities learned about private property and land ownership through a process of imposed narratives that implied the expropriation of their land, stories and culture.

In these works, the artist asks how history is written, and by whom. She stops to look at writing processes and imposed narratives that become dominant through their proximity to power. She explores the creation of an apparent neutrality around political issues such as nature and the earth and questions the concept of landscape in art and society. From this perspective, education and history, images and looking are all mere conventions. As a rough comparison, we could say that in these paintings Harrison thinks of the image as the façade to a building – capable of standing alone while also hiding the rest of the building, the structure that sustains it. In these pieces, the artist seeks to evoke the building through the relationships she establishes between image and text.

HALL 05. GREENHAM COMMON

In 1981, a group of women chained themselves to the fence of the Royal Air Force base at Greenham Common (United Kingdom), to protest a decision by the British government to keep US nuclear missiles there. This led to the formation of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, which fought for the same cause. The missiles were removed in 1991, but the camp remained operational until 2000 to protest the Trident nuclear missile programme. Margaret Harrison visited the camp on several occasions. 'The fence itself was almost a piece of artwork, like a canvas which people used to hang banners and paintings on and weave things into'. When the New Museum of New York invited her to be an artist in residence in 1989, she decided to do a work on the camp and to make people in the United States aware of it: 'after all, the missiles are theirs'. Exploring once more the relation between activism and art, she produced a series on the history and life of the camp, which she presented in an installation there at the Bowery. 'I wanted to create a diary of images from the fence that were both personal and political.' For a second showing of the installation in 2013, she added mirrors in reference to the 1983 action in which thousands of women carrying mirrors surrounded the base to ask the military personnel to 'reflect' on their actions.

HALL 06. CLOTHES MAKE THE CHILD

Dress and clothing, elaborated according to the mandates of sex, gender, and sexuality are associated with landscape in this series, as a way of dismantling the 'natural' narrative that sustains them and emphasizing that both are signs, cultural constructs. How is a landscape built? Why do its inhabitants live there as they do? The artist poses such questions with Ellen's dress (1993), using the painting to situate women's experiences in a global context. She establishes a comparison between ordinances of sex, gender and sexuality with the production and circulation of goods. Ellen's dress tells the story of the dress that Harrison bought in Cumbria, the one Ellen wears in the painting, which was made and sold in the geographic locations listed around her figure.

HALL 08. MARILYN

In the series on Marilyn Monroe, the epitome of the world-famous Hollywood star, Harrison re-examines pop art and culture from a critical feminist perspective. She offers a reflection on the traditional role of art in building hegemonic narratives, and its relationship with other types of discourse that serve ideological apparatuses, such as the propagandistic machinery of Hollywood. The Marilyn series constructs a reversal of pop art while conserving its theme and techniques. In this room, three images are contrasted. The first depicts a young Marilyn on the beach and references photographs taken by regular people on outings in their free time: a common image. The second is an extreme close-up of Marilyn – a sophisticated product of Hollywood's 'star system' imaging technology: an iconic image. The third is the only published photograph of the dead actress: a forgotten image. The dialogue established between these three images addresses the relationship between representation, narrative and reality. Harrison's materialistic perspective projects some especially deep aspects of the relationship between form and concept in the case of Marilyn Monroe, which are also applicable to other media-product personalities. The Hollywood narrative cannot be dissociated from the person who represents it.

HALL 09. ESSENCE OF IDENTITY

This series arose from the connection that the artist established between the painting *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* (Édouard Manet, 1881–82), and some contemporary works portraying women who work for the viewer's enjoyment: specifically, women working in the cosmetic sections of large department stores. These watercolour paintings denounce a visual-ideological apparatus that commodifies women, promotes the idea that women exist to serve men, and pushes servile femininity as an item of consumption. These often go unnoticed in the crush of the propagandistic, desire-creating machinery of consumer temples and their liturgies. The machinery perfectly articulates the elegance and allure of these spaces with women situated 'behind the showcase', the counter, in order to draw attention. The products offer the promises and miracles of modernity, and the women themselves are contracted and displayed to represent the product or brand in the selling space. In these watercolours, as in Manet's painting, the subject's eyes are often focused outside the frame, inviting us to consider the intersection between cosmetics and commerce, cosmetics and identity. The seductive presentation of these paintings – with exquisite attention to the frame, the walls, the lighting – induce us to reflect on the experience of looking and to analyse the contradictions harboured in the objectification of women and the acquisition of pleasure.

HALL 10. BEAUTIFUL UGLY VIOLENCE

Violence, specifically violence against women, is a recurring theme in Margaret Harrison's work. In this series she insists that, contrary to what many sectors of society believe, violence against women is not of an isolated type, but consubstantial to a violent and global patriarchal system. Harrison supports this in her work, showing how types of violence against women around the world or in diverse public and private spheres are related. Rejecting stereotypical explanations and oversimplified feminist debates around the concept of victimisation, she asked the agent to select inmates imprisoned for crimes of violence against women and to ask them, during her regular interviews with them, why they committed the crimes. *Beautiful Ugly Violence* is composed of mixed media collages as well as watercolour and oil paintings in which Harrison explores the strategies implemented by the contemporary patriarchal system to beautify violence against women. She denounces the deliberate use of aesthetics to create 'beautiful' or suggestive images of that which is deplorable. The simple still life paintings in this series have been strategically composed to approach the topic of violence against women from a different angle. 'We get pity fatigue from a blizzard of images,' Harrison states. 'So instead of bodies, I used actual things, so that the objects themselves become the focus...with the beauty of paint, you can convey the horror more subtly.'

HALL 11. THE BODIES ARE BACK

In the early 1970s, the gay and lesbian movement had not yet acquired the cultural categories of sex, gender, and sexuality that have since been postulated by feminist social scientists. The situation began to change with the emergence of the queer scene in the late 1980s. In her 2010 exhibition *The Bodies Are Back*, at a gallery in San Francisco's legendary Castro gay district, Margaret Harrison revisited the strategy and iconography of her 1971 exhibition. Her work was enthusiastically received, and those in new feminist and LGBTQ contexts began to clamour around artists using this type of iconography. For them, the 'reversed gaze' was more than a form of protest; they perceived it as a mechanism for rebellion. The series moves beyond exposing and denouncing the rigidity and hierarchy of stereotypes that naturalize the 'male-masculine-heterosexual' and 'female-feminine-heterosexual' accommodations. It explores the complexity and range of ideas about identity, pointing to possible intersections of sex, gender, sexuality, class, and race. In re-examining the workings of her reversal images thirty-nine years later, Harrison introduced mirrors into the series. This unprecedented element marked a new phase of reflection on looking as an ideological apparatus. In the process, the artist also extended her cultural critique of pop icons to include contemporary artists as well as those recognized as the 'masters' of painting.

HALL 12. THE FEMINIST GAZE

Mirrors are frequently used in feminist discourse as a recurrent element that refers us to the question of looking. In 1929, Virginia Woolf wrote: 'Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.' Margaret Harrison has used or portrayed mirrors profusely, along with recourse to different planes in the same image, to interrupt the linear gaze and play with the double concepts of reflecting-reflection and seeing-perceiving. *The Last Gaze* (2013) is perhaps her best-known mirror piece. The gaze is a central theme of feminism, which has sought to de-naturalize it since the 1970s, when feminists began to think of looking as a masculine cultural construct inserted into a socio-sexual system aimed at perpetuating the patriarchal order. Some feminist artists have dedicated themselves to de-constructing and subverting the patriarchal gaze through works that expose how it is constructed. Margaret Harrison has taken this path and developed a way of looking that captures the asymmetry between the sexes. From there, she inverts the symbols of the sex-gender-sexuality triad in order to reveal its hierarchy. Her 'reversed gaze' expands in scope and depth as the artist contemplates categories that intersect the triad, such as social class. This intersectional feminist gaze can be defined as one that interrupts the masculine gaze through its capacity to expand it by showing its multiple ties to the socio-historical and ideological matrix that sustains it. This gaze makes the invisible visible and exposes the 'discarded plans' by which women have been erased from history. In the process, it reveals the socio-political origin of the act of looking.