

**FEMINIST  
PERSPECTIVES  
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS  
AND THEORIES OF ART**

**VI. EDITION**

2017

Author

**LYNNE SEGAL**

Title

**WHO'LL BE MY MIRROR? SCANDALOUS  
FEMALE FLESH**



**AZKUNA ZENTROA  
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO**

I have been worried about whether I am the right woman for the job here, being neither an expert on, nor performer in, the visual arts. However, I have for decades been reflecting on feminism and gender in the world at large. 'I'll be your mirror', the wonderful Nan Goldin entitled her exciting exhibition catalogue, when so many feminist artists were flourishing, in the 1990s, and I'll return to her later! However, it has been a long, tough and contentious struggle for women to be able to make any such promise to other women, as I'll explain.

Despite the extraordinary impact second wave feminism was about to make, it was certainly hardest of all back when feminists first begun contesting women's exclusion from culture and politics, back in the 1960s. One of the 1st names to conjure with was Carolee Schneemann, making her mark over fifty years ago. She was objecting to the enduring framing of women, almost seamlessly, through men's eyes, and men's eyes alone. Reduced to their bodies, in galleries throughout the world female flesh was positioned passively, obligingly, seemingly for men's cool gaze: its actual materiality – its blood, sweat, wrinkles, pubic hair and all the rest of it – air-brushed out. What Schneemann hoped to do was to challenge art's presentation of this iconic female nude, with her troop of performers, displaying instead what she saw as 'the real thing', actual female pleasure and frolics, bodies naked, intertwined, in eager erotic embraces, in her energetic staging of what she called Body Art.

The Sixties may have been the decade of sexual liberation, but it was not yet ready to see women wanting to define it for themselves. Quite the opposite! In Paris, at the first Festival of Free Expression in 1964, a man raced onto stage and tried to strangle Schneemann, during the wild exuberance of her carnal celebrations, *Meat Joy*.<sup>2</sup> Things had barely changed a few years later, at the Dialectics of Liberation Conference in the Roundhouse, in London in 1967, organized by R.D. Laing and David Cooper. Schneemann was the sole female performer, among a plethora of male left luminaries, even as Angela Davis, Juliet Mitchell, Sheila Rowbotham, and other budding feminist pioneers, sat silently in the audience. Schneemann's participation was never mentioned in the notes for or recollections of that significant moment, and she was heckled during her performance, accused of narcissism and irrelevance, in her own assertive display of female flesh.

Indeed, Schneemann would only find true recognition for her developing art work as women's liberation blossomed the following decade. This saw her landmark performance of 'Interior Scroll', as a now feminist-informed audience watched mesmerized in 1975 as Schneemann climbed onto a table, and began pulling out and reading from a rolled-up scroll, emerging from her vagina.

As we know, the way in which women enter and are perceived in the cultural arena (whatever its nature) changes with shifts in the broader intellectual and political contexts and interests. *Context is crucial!* And this was a moment when feminists thought they could and must search out the hitherto hidden truth of women's experience, across time and place, as books like Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History* and *Women's Consciousness, Man's Worlds* in the UK, or Robyn Morgan's US anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*, later Adrienne Rich's *Of Women Born*, were all being eagerly imbibed by budding Western feminists.<sup>3</sup> These texts mostly resonated with Schneemann's sense that women's imaginative and creative force came from our own experiences and our own bodies, which she called 'vulvic space', where women's art-production combined with female sensual experience. This was seen as definitively at odds with dominant masculine art modes, all said as objectifying women, replacing them with women's own agentic exploration of our own bodies and experiences. We soon see view this widely reflected in art work and writing, now busy portraying women's journey's – from silence to selfhood – in visual culture, most obviously evident in Judy Chicago's iconic, *Dinner Party*, from 1979, presented as a celebration of women in history.

Yet, as you'll also know, the inclusion of women's own productions in visual and other cultural media has been *neither* a straight-forward *nor* an easy process. Soon the semiotic brigade, pondering from where meanings, stories and narratives emerge, would question *any* understanding of our women's *shared* experiences, whether seen as emerging from within, or without. They were quick to point out, for

---

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Sussman and Nan Goldin: *I'll Be Your Mirror*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996

<sup>2</sup> See Lucy Lippard, 'The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art', *Art in America*, 64 (3):73-81.

<sup>3</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History and Women's Consciousness, Man's Worlds*, London, Pluto Press, 1975; Robyn Morgan (ed) *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, New York, NY, Vintage, 1970; Adrienne Rich's *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York, NY, Bantam Books, 1977.



instance, that it was predominantly strait, white women who were seated at Chicago's table. Significant figures from other groups of women had not been invited to dine. Women, it was increasingly obvious, were far from a homogenous group — other dynamics of power operated to divide women, vividly contrasting histories and cultural locations shaped our experiences, and our readings of them.

In actuality, long before the so-called linguistic turn (and the impact of critical feminist theorist such as Joan Scott and Judith Butler in the 1990s), some Seventies feminists, Sheila Rowbotham for a start, had always stressed this when reflecting upon the category of experience: 'I am too encumbered by the particular to move with grace and delicacy between subjective experience and the broad sweep of social relationships'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as that feisty New York Jewish analyst Muriel Dimen would later write, mocking new forms of feminist rectitude, 'looking for shared experiences between women frequently meant disregarding the incongruous or divisive'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, quite a few other feminists, including me in my first book *Is the Future Female?*, were soon suggesting that it was foolish simply to applaud assumptions of women's intrinsic tendencies to manifest greater care, empathy, tenderness and the eschewal of violence (when compared to men), without paying close and nuanced attention to social context, as well as all the other social relations criss-crossing gender.<sup>6</sup> This is what is today known as intersectionality.

Certainly, from the 1980, ever more women were speaking their own distinct differences, including the assertion of working class, lesbian, race and ethnic particularities. In this flowering of representations of women's specificities, the legacy of non-white histories was especially prominent. Art theorists such as Adrian Piper and others wrote of the intersections of gender, race and above all, the long shadows of slavery and colonial history in shaping women's subjectivities. Post-colonial experience in continuing, if modified, imperialist contexts means that there are often remains few ways of survival for traditionally subordinated women other than as domestic servants in white families, with few or no rights, and many ethnic minority women are still forced into forms of sexual servicing, devoid of recognition or dignity.

From my birthplace, Australia, the aboriginal artist Tracey Moffatt, who was born in an Aboriginal reservation outside Brisbane but fostered to a white family (though maintaining contact with her original family), was soon one of the best-known and illustrious black artists. She used film to retell tales of the trauma and resistance of her indigenous people. Moffatt was not one of the so-called 'Stolen Generation', forcibly removed from their parents into orphanages and usually subsequent servitude in white households. However, she depicts the confusing, contradictory realities of the two worlds she moved between, as in her *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) and *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1990). These were followed by a feature film *BeBevilled* (1993).<sup>7</sup> In the gripping narrative of *Night Cries*, for instance, the black woman later becomes the carer of the now elderly white woman her fostered her. In flash-backs we see the affection in their shifting relationship, which is also inevitably also a troubled one, as anxieties, tensions and burdens of racism and oppression remain part of the black woman's experiences: happy memories of acceptance and assimilation collide with recollections of the violence and subjugation of her people.

I recently read a much harsher novel covering the same narrative written by the wonderful African feminist and writer Marlene Van Nieker, called *Agaat*. Here the machinations of power are palpable between the African woman, Milla, who has rescued and taken into her unhappy white household, but also consistently subjugated, the 5 year-old black child (Agaat). Agaat later becomes the resentful but always solicitous sole custodian and carer of the ageing, disabled Milla. There is far more bitterness and cruelty here, in Van Nieker's depiction of Agaat as both foster daughter and slave.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas*, London, Virago, 1983, p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Muriel Dimen, 'In the Zone of Amivalence: A Journal of Competition' in Susan Weisser and Jennifer Fleishner, (eds.) *Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds*, New York, New York University Press, 1994, p.362.

<sup>6</sup> Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female*, London, Virago, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Alessandra Senzani, 'Dreaming Back: Tracey Moffatt's Bedeviling Films.' *POST SCRIPT: Essays in Film and the Humanities* Vol. 27(1) (Fall 2007): 50-71.

<sup>8</sup> Marlene Van Nieker, *Agaat*, trans. Michiel Heyns, New York, NY, Tin House Books; 2006.



Images of the fragile mother bring me to one of the second half themes of this essay, depictions of women and ageing. But before turning to this theme I want to point out that the registering of difference was often recorded in joyful and playful ways, as well as painful. This was especially true in the impact of queer culture, as in that warm focus of Nan Goldin's camera. As she said, in her work she always tries to 'look with a loving gaze', whether on women, men and everything in between, as well on pain, illness, addiction, pleasure, fantasy and joyful make-believe: 'For me it's not a detachment to take a picture. It's a way of touching somebody — it's a cress...I just get inspired to take pictures by the beauty and vulnerability of my friends.'<sup>9</sup>

So finally I come to what I think was, unconsciously at least, one of the last taboos for women, including, perhaps surprisingly, feminists. I am talking about old age, in particular, old women. This is all the more crucial a topic today with the greying of the population generally, and more of us than ever living into old age. Yet, there remains an aversion towards even discussing the topic, with many reports showing that the growing number of elderly people has merely fanned gerontophobia — a social antipathy towards old people. Though most of us live longer, many of us, but especially women fear being seen as old at ever younger ages.<sup>10</sup>

Yet surely not this would not be true of feminists! Feminism, after all, strongly rejected all the ways in which women have been surveyed and defined in relation to our bodies, deploring alike the ephemeral nature of male-defined, female glamour, overwhelmingly associated with young, blonde, female, bodies, as well as the long hours of a day, of a lifetime, most women feel obliged to spend beautifying themselves, trying, and sooner or later failing, to prove ourselves desirable in the world of men. 'Stay young and beautiful if you want to be loved', we sung with ironic gusto, on the 1st ever national Women's Liberation march in Britain on International Women's Day, in 1971.<sup>11</sup> We had scant knowledge then of the cruel gravity of those words, when the fading of youthful confidence and collectivity left many of us as unprepared as any other woman to deal with the dramas of ageing.

It was not only our foremother, Simone de Beauvoir, who lamented bitterly at the age of 55 that she hated the sight of her own face in the mirror, despaired that she would never again be able, never again be allowed, to experience any new desires, or to display her yearnings publicly. 'Never again!' she laments, naming the passing of all the things now slipping away from her grasp. Listing her former joys, plans and projects, she wrote: 'It is not I who am saying goodbye to all those things I once enjoyed, it is they who are leaving me'.<sup>12</sup> Earlier the popular French writer Collette had written angrily of all the work required 'to disguise that monster, an old woman'.<sup>13</sup> The sentiment is hard to fight, as feminists too remained largely unprepared for the dismay, fears, anxiety, yes, even for many the sudden horror, which the ageing woman can experience on looking into the mirror, and seeing a face she cannot accept, yet one uncannily familiar! It was, for example, another very committed American feminist, the cultural studies scholar, Vivian Sobchack, who proclaimed, in her book *Carnal Thoughts*: 'I despair of ever being able to reconcile my overall sense of well-being, self-confidence, achievement, and pleasure in the richness of the present with the image I see in the mirror'.<sup>14</sup> 'Look me in the eye', Cynthia Rich, younger sister of poet Adrienne Rich, demanded of other feminists when she reached 50, in a trailblazing book of that title in the early 1980s. In the text, which she wrote with her much older lover, Barbara Macdonald, she wrote of the ageism of younger feminists, who perhaps unconsciously, had paid so little attention to old age, thereby participating in the ageism of society generally.<sup>15</sup>

But as I explored in my own book *Out of Time: The Pleasures & Perils of Ageing*, perhaps we should not be too harsh on ourselves for finding it hard not to fear old age. This is because it is the old woman who has from time immemorial symbolized everybody's projected

---

<sup>9</sup> Nan Goldin, 'On Acceptance — A Conversation', in Sussman and Goldin, op.cit, p.452

<sup>10</sup> See Lynne Segal, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*, London, Verso, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> See Sheila Rowbotham's chapter, 'The 1970s', in her *A Century of Women*, London, Viking, 1997, p. 402.

<sup>12</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, *ibid.*, p. 673.

<sup>13</sup> Sidonie-Gabrielle Collette, *Chéri* [1920], London, Vintage, 2001, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> Vivian Sobchack, 'Cinema, Surgery, and Special Effects' in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2004, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich, *Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging, and Ageism*, New York, NY, Spinsters, Ink, 1983.



fears of ageing and mortality. Our culture, like all others before it, ages women faster than men: the most terrifying images of old age — the witch, hag, harridan — have always had a female face, whether in myth, folk-tale or horror movie. Indeed, once religion itself helped to orchestrate this horror of the older woman, and above all any signs of desire associated with older women's flesh.

The two Jesuit priests Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer helped codify and condone those witch-hunts that swept across Europe for hundreds of years throughout the middle ages, their targets overwhelmingly older women, usually older women, who were poor and living alone. At its most basic, the Witch, still entering our imaginations from the folk-tales and legends of childhood, is an old woman, one who gains power in weird and wicked ways: via her magic, spells, and perverse coupling with the devil. That terrifying creature, She who Must be Destroyed, as Sprenger and Kramer summed things up in their treatise on the prosecution of witches in 1487, *Malleus Malificarum: on Witches who copulate with Devils*, were women whose frustrated sexual passions and secret longings for power made them an easy target for the Devil: their intrinsically weaker nature making them a conduit for him to enter.<sup>16</sup>

This dramatic contradiction between old women's weakness and their lethal power were also what made the image of the witch such an exciting figure for artists. The notion of female difference and perversity was visually appealing, the stuff of nightmares and of our secret inner worlds — however sceptical some of the artists (particularly Goya) may have been about exactly where the superstitions lay in the demonization of the older woman. Was it with the witch — with her broomstick, spells, magic and disgraceful carnality — or with those who perceived women as such. There is thus a type of beauty in Goya's obsession with witches, however demonized.

Nevertheless, even after end of witchcraft, those images of grotesque ugly women still surround us in the galleries of Europe, mocking above all that ageing female flesh that dares to expose itself. *The Ugly Duchess* (also known as *A Grotesque Old Woman*), painted by the Flemish artist Quentin Matsys around 1513 remains iconic of the scorn for old women's old woman with wrinkled skin and withered breasts. The point here is that this woman, with her Aristocratic headdress, would once have been a woman with status and nobility, but now, no longer young, is a mere figure of fun. Recall Collette's words, on how much effort a woman must put in to hiding her own monstrosity.

Well, either we do all in our power to disguise ageing female flesh, or else we try to resist this shaming of the older woman, something that is never short of challenging. But that is what just a few creative workers have been trying to do for a few decades now. One early work was a film by the American artist Yvonne Rainer, now in her 80s, and best known as a choreographer and dancer, only later as a film-maker. Reaching middle-age in the 1980s, Rainer noted the grim silence surrounding the actual experiences of older women, from menopause onwards. Indeed, although a crucial point for many women, the menopause itself remained at that time almost completely invisible in the media — except for the pharmaceutical companies marketing their menopause and anti-ageing products. This prompted Rainer's docudrama 'Privilege' of 1990, mixing interviews with women about their experiences of menopause, alongside actors reflecting on privilege more generally. The film covers notions of all white people's privilege in relation to black and ethnic minorities, alongside the general privileges of class and cultural capital accruing to some and denied others. Yet the film also reveals that privilege is also relative and shifting, above all for women of every category, as they age. All the attention (desired and unwanted) heaped upon young women's bodies and sexualities is dramatically withdrawn from middle-age with, as we've already seen, older women's desires either denied or else mocked and scorned, at least in the straight world. Wittily inter-cutting archival footage, video, and film, we see in this clip from the *Privilege* one woman commenting "The most remarkable thing was the silence from friends and family regarding the details of my single middle age. When I was younger my sex life had been the object of all kind of questioning ...Now ...the state of my desires seemed of no interest to anyone".

In *Out of Time I* explore a reality in which older women's desires are not just ignored, but it seems many women themselves, quite unlike men, find it easier to declare themselves post-sexual. Doris Lessing, another courageous chronicler of her own life from middle age onwards, reminds us of the shame and humiliation older single women are likely to feel if they do acknowledge erotic desire. Her memoirs repeatedly express regret and bitterness over the sexual plight of the ageing woman, highlighting the intensity of confusion, loneliness, regret and

---

<sup>16</sup> Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum Hammer of the Witches*, New York, Dover Publications, 1971.



loss that she herself first experienced in early middle age, suffering from what she described as the 'clinical condition' of many another discarded middle-aged woman: 'who slides into drinking, feeling abandoned, unloved, unwanted'.<sup>17</sup> The catastrophic narrative she depicts of an elderly woman experiencing desire in *Love Again* mirrors her own autobiographical sketches, as her older protagonist realizes she cannot compete with the appeal of younger women: 'There is now no difference between me and those people barred from love ... everyone, but everyone, will learn what it is to be in a desert of deprivation'; 'old women by the thousand — probably by the million — are in love and keep quiet about it. They have to...'<sup>18</sup>

So this is the sort of challenge I said faces artists hoping to reconfigure all of our perceptions of, and feelings about older women. The long legacies of abjection do still have serious consequences. In the UK, for instance, older women are twice as likely as older men to end up living alone in old age, with no companion to care for them. Recently, a Commission here on older women provided stark evidence of the continuing social invisibility of older women in public life. Few will be surprised to learn that 82 % of BBC presenters over the age of 50 are men. Older women are also routinely ushered away from our screens — except in horror movies, or films on dementia. More generally, unemployment amongst women aged 50-64 had increased by over 40% in recent years, compared with one per cent overall.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, there are artists rising to the challenge. One of them is the American fine art photographer Joyce Tenneson, who not only has a series she calls 'Wise Women', but also portrays erotic older women's flesh — *Desire Lingers*, as *Flesh Ages*, is a truth we have yet to see fully accepted.<sup>20</sup>

Another British poet and artist Leah Thorn has been working on a project she calls *Older Women Rock*. Once more, there is a determined assertion not to hide old age, as we are everywhere encouraged to do, but rather to attempt to assert it with pride.

Although we all tend to, the genuine Ageist Resister would not be hoping to hear that that she does not look her age, but seek the strength to proclaim it confidently. It's a tall order, but we could begin to try.<sup>21</sup>

But let me close on my own recent writing, which is looking at Moments of Collective Joy, no time to elaborate here, but they often have a political inflection, where young and old come together, not only embarking on collective resistance, but at least for a while, enjoying moments of shared joy.

Of course, I see this too in some of the actions of the Guerrilla Girls, who, behind their masks, and demanding more images of women in public galleries, could indeed be any age at all.

---

<sup>17</sup> Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography — 1949-1962*, London, Flamingo, 1998, p.262.

<sup>18</sup> Lessing, *Love, Again*, London, Flamingo, 1997, p.136; p. 171

<sup>19</sup> Labour Party, *The Commission on Older Women — Interim Report*, [http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Commission\\_on\\_Older\\_Women\\_-\\_Interim\\_Report.pdf](http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Commission_on_Older_Women_-_Interim_Report.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Joyce Tenneson, *Wise Women: A Celebration of Their Insights, Courage, and Beauty*, New York, NY, Bullfinch Press, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Leah Thorn, *Older Women Rock*, <https://loveolderwomenrock.wordpress.com/about> downloaded November, 2017.

