

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

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Author

CAROL DUNCAN

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**SEARCHING FOR A FEMINIST ART HISTORY
IN THE 1970s**



**AZKUNA ZENTROA
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO**

One of the things that happens to you when you get older is that you become an object of historical curiosity. So, I come to Bilbao as a living antique to reminisce about the decade of the 1970s, the decade of my beginnings as an art historian, and the moment when the second wave of feminism became a part of both the art world and the academic world in New York City. What I hope to do today is relate some of context in which feminism first arrived and some of the first questions it raised.

To begin before the beginning. Through most of the 1960s, I was a graduate student at Columbia University, where I was working on a doctorate in art history. The discipline of art history, as one encountered it in American universities at that time, was, to put it gently, rather unexciting intellectually. I was attracted to the field because it seemed to me that the study of art could bring alive thoughts and feelings of the past as well as the present, not only thoughts and feelings about art but also about broader life experience. I did not expect graduate school to be intellectually exciting, but I gambled that I could get through it and still be interested in art. In a few years the discipline would be challenged by the “new art history”, as it was called in the 70s and 80s, but at that moment—in the 60s—the “old art history” guided students towards only a few models of inquiry. The three most common were stylistic (or formal) analysis, the study of iconographic themes, and problems in connoisseurship. One learned these models much like artisans of old learned a craft—by imitating their masters’ ways of working. There was very little discussion of the discipline’s theoretical assumptions. Research into iconography tended to follow the example of Irwin Panofsky; it privileged literary and philosophical texts, thus locating old-master painting in the lofty realm of humanistic knowledge. A few independent souls studied art institutions, patronage, and the art market, topics that most people in the discipline regarded as marginal. The main business of art history was the discovery and elucidation of the unique and transcendent value of Art and the particulars of the artistic labor or genius that produced it, that genius invariably being male.

In those Cold War years, the discipline was not friendly to questions of ideology. The term barely appeared in the literature of art history, and when it did, it usually meant simply a system of thought. Nor was the discipline open to considerations of class interest or class identity, matters thought to be relevant to the social sciences, but transgressive when pursued in the humanities. There had been all along a few brilliant art historians who did talk about class, Frederick Antal among them, but their work was largely ignored. It was all right to explore literary and philosophical influences in the visual arts, but the meanings of art in relation to the historical, social, and economic conditions in which it was produced was pretty much out of bounds. For many involved in the arts at that time, art was a kind of escape from the conflicts and upheavals of the 20th century. Especially after World War II, it was a realm apart from the ugly realities of the world. Yet, a small group of scholars, including Meyer Schapiro, then nearing retirement, and Linda Nochlin, at the beginning of her career, were interested in the relationship of art production to social and political phenomena. I took their presence in the discipline to mean that academic art history was at least open to the possibility of such research. Feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism—these had not yet become ‘turns’ in the discipline. They would be very soon, and would bring about the collapse of the old art history.

It is important to note that in the years just preceding the rise of second wave feminism in the US, the decade of the 1960s, the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements were gathering ever greater momentum, and—although less noticed in the press—a renewed Feminism and a Gay Rights Movement were in formation. Among intellectuals, artists, and students (myself included), there were strong Left and Liberal-Left currents that fed into and drew energy from the Civil Rights and Anti-War protests. The University of California campus in Berkeley was especially alive with such activity. As has often been remarked, the habit of challenging established authority and questioning social and cultural institutions marked this generation of young people and gave a strong stimulus to the revival of feminism.

During my years as a graduate student at Columbia University, from the Autumn of 1963 to the Spring of 1969, Civil Rights and anti-war ferment mostly remained outside the gates of the university. But, in the Spring of 1968, while I was still writing my dissertation, both movements exploded in middle of the campus. Students occupied several academic buildings as part of a protest against certain racist policies of the University and what was considered war-related research conducted within some of its departments. The occupation forced the university to stop its business as usual. For many of us on campus, the ensuing days amounted to an exhilarating short course in institutional politics and collective action. In brief, the liberal officers of the university, faced with protesting students who had barricaded themselves inside a number of campus buildings, called in the police, who routed the occupiers with deliberate violence. The university’s use of force to end what we saw as essentially a debate about moral values taught a valuable lesson about the limits of liberalism and the



violence it resorts to when its legitimacy is threatened. The brutality of the police action spurred both undergraduate and graduate students to organize in support of the strike. Some of my art history professors, venerated as “humanist” scholars by their students, seemed utterly blind to the moral crisis brought on by the strike. Unwilling even to acknowledge the contradictions in their own situation, they counselled us to return to the library and our classrooms. Watching these prominent representatives of a discipline that paraded itself as a custodian of higher values made me worry. In the process of “mastering” my discipline, I wondered, to what degree had I absorbed the attitudes and expectations of these professionals? Their way of disconnecting the politics of their professional lives in the university from the politics of the world outside—didn’t this replicate art history’s avoidance of the social and the political meanings of art? I needed to find out in what ways my training had transformed me into a component of a machine I didn’t like but would be dependent on for the practice of my profession.

So I set about a program of self-reeducation, reading people such as Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Herbert Marcuse and other New Left and Frankfurt School writers. These people opened up for me issues about art and society and introduced me to concepts of ideology. They showed me a kind of engaged scholarship that was far richer and more vital than the narrow versions of it I had learned in graduate school. One upshot of all of this was that for a long time, the last place I felt I belonged was in the center of established academia, least of all in some prestigious university where I would be expected to transmit to others the conventional practices of the discipline. I should add that most prestigious universities felt the same way about me — that I didn’t belong in them. Eventually, in the course of the next two decades, as the discipline was transformed by younger people, this changed, and people with views similar to mine became senior professors in higher education. They began inviting me to lecture on their campuses, and even arranged visiting professorships for me. Meanwhile, I remained quite content at the progressive undergraduate institution I taught at a few miles outside of New York City.

As I embarked on my program of catching up with New Left thinking, I became aware of the beginnings of the Feminist Movement in the US—this was around 1969. In the four-and-one-half decades since, whole new ways of thinking have dramatically transformed how we make, talk and write about art. Back in the 70s, there was barely a trickle of writing about women and art and precious little about the social and political history of art. I had read Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1953) around 1960, and had been astonished to find analyses of aspects of my own experience that I had not had the language to articulate. But in the absence of a larger movement, Beauvoir’s insights seemed fenced off; they had not yet been collectively taken on by a current feminist discourse and made part of an on-going conversation. I reread *The Second Sex* in the early 70s, when such philosophically accomplished feminist writing was still a great rarity, and again found much to admire. I’m sure I absorbed Beauvoir’s ideas in ways I no longer even remember. (I am aware that she was later criticized by some feminists, but I found much more to like than dislike). Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a more journalistic critique of cultural clichés about women and femininity, had been a popular best-seller in the US and no doubt helped introduce feminist issues to a wide audience. But now more radical critiques began appearing, and they came from more than one place.

Some of the first feminist voices I heard were those of women who had been active in the Columbia University student strike of 1968. Their feminism was not so much a reaction to the university’s patriarchal policies, but rather to the outrageously sexist attitudes of their striking male comrades, who, it turned out, expected the women to supply various comforts but not to decide policy. These women were determined to remain Leftists, but they also set out to critique the Leftist history of treating women as unequals. Certainly, Socialist intellectuals had long been aware of women’s oppression and had written about it often enough, but that concern had not trickled down to day-to-day behavior. Most of the women I knew were Left academic women, many of them, like myself, newly minted PhD’s in the humanities. My network of friends and acquaintances also included women who had spent years organizing anti-war demonstrations and who had then gone on to earn doctorates, often in history. These women would bring to feminist scholarship a sharp focus on women’s history. I also had ties with women artists, who were creating their own network of collaborative groups and exhibition spaces.

It should be clear from this narrative that my particular entry point into the women’s movement was through the portal of Leftist politics. I was hardly alone in my effort to assimilate New Left thinking and also pursue a new feminist critique. The decade of the 70s was a time of intense study groups, consciousness-raising groups, collaborative writing and research projects and small publications. At one time or another, I belonged to several such groups, some of them lasting a number of years. It seemed that just about everyone I knew was involved



in a study group or collaborative project. Most of the humanistic disciplines—philosophy, history, and literature, for example—formed radical caucuses within their professional organizations. Artists and art historians together created such a caucus within the College Art Association (the CAA), organized panels at the annual meetings of the CAA, and published their proceedings. (One of the Caucus publications appears in this slide of small publications I pulled from my shelves; next to it is *L'histoire et critiques des arts*, a publication produced by French Marxists that also printed some German art historians. Our network was quite international.) In those days, besides teaching and writing, I spent a lot of time in meetings, making phone calls, and digging up and photocopying articles to pass on to others. Some of this activity focused more on Left politics, some more on art, some more on feminist critique, and some on the problem of how to relate feminism to Marxist critique. I will return to that subject later.

I began publishing in the early 70s. For the next ten years or so, I published in two areas: 18th and 19th century French art, and 20th-century European and American. I will talk about some of the 18th and 19th-century work first. I did not systematically pick my topics with an eye toward working through specific theoretical problems. Research ideas often came to me in the middle of a lecture I was giving about a work of art. My first article, “Happy Mothers and other New Ideas in 18th-century French Art,” (Duncan, 1973a) began in that way. A friend had given me a copy of Philippe Ariés’s book *Centuries of Childhood*, (1962) a ground-breaking study of the history of the family, its changing roles, and the emergence of modern concepts of the child in bourgeois culture prior to the French Revolution. Published in France in 1960, the book appeared in English translation in 1962 and would be a foundational text for subsequent studies of the history of the family. The book was my introduction to a subject whose history I had never thought about, and it blew me away. It had not occurred to me that family roles and emotional ties familiar in the modern world were not universal but shaped by historical conditions. Soon after I read Ariés, around 1969, in a lecture I was giving on French art in the 18th century, I put on the screen slides of paintings by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and other artists celebrating the joys of motherhood and the family.¹ I knew that art-historians, in their surveys of 18th century art, usually rushed past such genre paintings as quickly as possible. Compared to the grandeur of the Great Artists who went before, men like Rubens or Poussin, and also the ones who came after, like David or Gros, these pictures were uncomfortably saccharine and all too close to the soppy mother’s-day cards of today. They were just not serious enough to be taken as Art. Chardin was one of the few artists producing works in this genre to command any art-historical respect, thanks largely to his strong formal qualities, which art historians usually emphasized over his subject matter. I knew the standard art-historical narrative, of course, but when I put these slides on the screen, suddenly my reading of Ariés made me see their historical significance. I realized that they were saying something new.

As I read more about the history of the bourgeois family and its changing attitudes toward marriage and children in 18th-century France, I saw that these emotionally excessive pictures spoke to real needs and aspirations. Not that conjugal family relationships like the ones pictured were common in bourgeois marriages. According to the social historians I read, traditional marriages were usually arranged, not for the emotional needs of a couple but with an eye to securing advantages for the family line and producing legitimate heirs. Families that could afford it almost always sent their babies away to be nursed by someone else (or they employed wet-nurses at home). Not long after being weaned, boys were sent away again, this time to school, with the result that they could grow up hardly knowing their parents. In the second half of the 18th century, enlightened opinion began to condemn these practices and call for a new more intimate, loving kind of family. These pictures were part of this call for reform, which spelled out the new psychological functions of the nuclear family unit. At its center was the wife-mother whose role now included the work of producing psychologically autonomous sons. Girls, following the example of their mothers, would be raised to tend to the needs to others. Images of happy mothers and happy families thus held up a picture of the home as a haven removed from the world and its insecurities. A work like Pierre Paul Prud’hon’s *Happy Mother*, c. 1810, Wallace Collection, London, is such a vision. Prud’hon obviously drew from past iconographies of both the Madonna and Child and Venus and Cupid to create a mood of serene and emotionally gratifying intimacy. I do not mean to say that this was wholly a negative development. Although these pictures argue that motherhood is the only source of happiness for a woman, they also acknowledge a positive value in

¹ For illustrations of “Happy mothers” on line, see: Duncan, C. (1973), Happy mothers and other new ideas in Eighteenth-Century french art”, *Art Bulletin*, LV (1973), p. 570-583 *The Art Bulletin* LV. Retrieved from: <http://www.collegeart.org/pdf/artbulletin/Art%20Bulletin%20Vol%2055%20No%204%20Duncan.pdf>



women's nurturing experience. But in the 70s, when I wrote this, the thesis that for women, biology is destiny and that women who are not mothers are not fully women and cannot know happiness, was still dominant, and that is where I hit the hardest.

A few years later, I wrote a companion piece to "Happy Mothers" entitled "Fallen Fathers: Images of Authority in Pre-Revolutionary French Art." (Duncan 1981) Compared to "Happy Mothers," this article may seem less overtly feminist in its subject, but I saw it as central to my scholarly project as a feminist, as I hope to explain. In the 70s, patriarchy had quickly become the target of feminist writing, but it was mostly taken as an eternal, unchanging source of women's subordination, and there wasn't much attention given to how it varied in different times and places, including the different ways it organized the social and psychic lives of men and women.

I got the idea for the "Fathers" piece at an exhibition of French salon painting from the time of the French Revolution. ("French Painting") Salon paintings were works exhibited in the public exhibitions staged by the Royal Academy of Art. What struck me about so many of the works in this exhibition, some painted before, some after, the Revolution, were the number of images of old men who had fallen on hard times. Some of these figures were drawn from classical literature; some from history. If not already dead, they were dying, or feeble, or blind (there were many treatments of the story of Oedipus). No longer figures of unquestioned authority, they were often dependent on others. The painting *Belisarius* by the French history painter François-André Vincent, in the Musée Fabre, Montpellier, depicts another subject that was popular at this time, the once-great Roman general Belisarius, now blind and reduced to begging. A soldier formerly under his command recognizes the still powerful-looking general and visibly cringes at the sight of his fall. The fallen fathers exhibited in the Salons also included fictional narratives. Greuze did a pair of paintings of this kind in 1778 and 1779, both in the Louvre Museum. In the first one, *The Father's Curse*, a son is leaving home to join the army without his father's permission. In the sequel, *The Son Punished*, set a few years later, he returns home, now a disabled veteran, only to find his father dead. The visual bare bones of the story amounts to a patricide. A son strikes out for his freedom and his father dies. Cause and effect. The story is presented as a melodrama with all the blame on the side of the "ungrateful son" and all the sympathy on the side of the father. Yet, the pair of images enable the viewer to identify secretly with the criminal under the cover of consciously denouncing him. It is a matter of seeing what could not be said nor even easily thought.

It seemed to me that these images gave evidence of growing tensions around patriarchal authority, the dominant authority throughout French society. From the humblest households to the highest court, everyone lived under a male authority of some kind and could exercise only those rights specifically granted by him. In some parts of France, a man could be kept a minor as long as his father lived, unable to marry or sign contracts. Conventional morality dictated that everyone revere, love, and obey father and king, but people could also harbor resentment at their own powerlessness or at the perceived unfairness of the patriarch—a resentment that could rarely be openly expressed. Eventually, the Revolution would take away the absolute authority of kings and fathers and would reconfigure patriarchal power, redistributing it among more men, but not abolishing it. Meanwhile, as these and other paintings testify, ambivalent feelings toward patriarchal figures became more intense in the years before the Revolution, no doubt fueled by a growing population and a scarcity of jobs (among other factors).

Images such as these, many of which pre-date the Revolution, seem to have offered viewers an opportunity to preview and rehearse emotionally a version of the deep psychic transformation that the Revolution would bring in male identity, namely, the transformation of obedient subjects into citizens possessed of rights and duties, answerable to the state rather than an individual patriarch. Jacques-Louis David's famous painting *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1784, Louvre Museum, virtually depicts the moment of this transformation. The sons of Horace swear allegiance not to their father but to the community. As armed citizens, they enter into a new relationship to an authority that has been transferred from the body of the father to the abstraction of the State. (Historically, the community of the Horaces was a tribe, but in the discourse of 18th-century French history painting, it functions as a stand-in for the French state.) The political implications of the work became fully understood only after the Revolution, five years after it was first exhibited. "Happy Mothers" had been about the new emerging ideal of the modern family in French bourgeois culture in the decades before the French Revolution and had focused on the new concept of the bourgeois mother. "Fallen Fathers" argued that the cult of the family and the ideal of a public sphere were both integral to the new bourgeois state. In the new configuration, fathers and sons share the political sphere of the state, but the women will continue to live under paternal authority. David portrays them as creatures of emotion, not reason, unable even to understand the nature of the



public realm in which their male relatives move. It is striking how unequivocally David marks the vertical boundary between the male and female spheres, literally drawing a red line (Horace's cloak) between them. The flowing curves of the women's bodies and the soft pastels of their robes are as different as possible from the array of muscle, bone and steel and the fiery red attire on the male side. The *Oath* thus emphatically differentiates the domestic space of the family in the right-hand third of the painting from the public sphere—the realm of the state—pictured on the left. It is significant that the only figure on the family side who stands upright and has open eyes is the boy, who watches intently the action of the men and who one day will step out of his mother's shadow and enter that space himself.

I need not tell you that in much of the world today, women still find that line difficult to cross and are still excluded from the public sphere by force or by custom. Even in liberal western democracies, formidable cultural, social, and psychological mechanisms work to maintain the separation. One minute after writing the last sentence, I looked at the *New York Times* and saw an article noting the unusual public appearances of Rula Ghani, the wife of the new president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, and the fact that her public visibility has angered conservatives. ("New visibility") Zeenat Karzai, the wife of the previous president and once a practicing doctor, had become completely invisible, the article reported, hidden away inside the presidential palace. Reading this, I did not know whether to be glad at the advance Rula Ghani has made or dismayed at the distance still to go. Maybe both. Yet, despite what feels like a war on women in many places in the world today, the dichotomy that David depicted is more challenged than ever before, and, no doubt because of that, more defended. It seems that the higher up the office and the greater the power at stake, the more women politicians are pressured to show that they are masculine enough to do the job. Margaret Thatcher made it clear that she had the balls to wage war. Hillary Clinton never shies away from asserting her hawkishness.

At the time I wrote "Fallen Fathers," I was convinced that feminist scholars, male as well as female, would examine not only how patriarchy has oppressed women but also the ways it has shaped and misshaped the psyches of men, how it has designated whole areas of human thought, feeling, and action, as out-of-bounds, unmanly, "girlish". To be sure, there have been articles, books, films and other things that address this issue, but I thought there would be a much more of it, and a much more concerted effort to challenge masculinity as a cultural construct.²

So far, I have spoken only of my work in the 18th and early 19th centuries. This was my primary area of scholarly research after graduate school, but I was also teaching modern material. Soon after completing "Happy Mothers," I published "Virility and Domination in Early 20th-Century Vanguard Painting."³ The idea for this article, too, came to me in the classroom. Like many beginning professors, my lectures still depended a lot on what I had learned in graduate school. On that particular day I was lecturing on the German Expressionist artists of the Brücke—Ernst Kirchner, Erich Heckel and others. The critical moment for me came as I was looking at Heckel's *Crystal Day*, 1913 (Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich). I was expounding on what made it avant-garde—it used Cubism to reject the conventional artistic traditions of its time, and as a corollary to its formal unconventionality, it proclaimed the artist's liberated sexual attitudes. Echoing the art-historical literature, I was, without thinking, treating Heckel as a typical modern-art hero, endorsing his artistic freedom as a signifier of his opposition to bourgeois constraints. But as I was lecturing, I could not help but notice that while the woman in this painting has no face, her nipples are quite detailed. And, although she is in a lake, she does not swim or even splash about; she simply stands there, motionless, a thing to be looked at. Exactly what kind of freedom is implied here, I wondered, if all this bohemian liberty from bourgeois morality leaves women as faceless objects? *Whose* freedom am I looking at?

My classroom encounter with Heckel sent me on a search for other images of women by vanguard artists, including, Kirchner, Picasso and Matisse. The article I finally wrote argued that whatever these works project about the artists' emancipated sexuality, their supposed freedom was conditioned on the unfreedom of their female models. Far from exhibiting subversive or even progressive values, I argued, these works suggest a fear of modern women and a lack of sympathy for their contemporary struggle for emancipation. In formal terms, their works may be progressive, but socially and psychologically they are reactionary. They also betray rather conventional attitudes about

² One artist who put this issue at the center of his work was the late Leon Golub, not incidentally, the partner of the feminist artist Nancy Spero.

³ The article's title, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," was meant as a parody of early 20th-century anthropological studies of "primitive" peoples.



class: the women who posed for them have no names, or are called only by given or nicknames. That is, they have no identity other than their availability as naked bodies, the hiring out of which (whether as models, mistresses, or prostitutes) was their means of support. The bohemian, presumably anarchistic men who painted them did not differ so much from their bourgeois clients in how they saw these women. Whether or not they were as sexually emancipated and horny in real life as their art implies, the images themselves carry a strong claim of virility. Part of what the bourgeois patron was purchasing was a share in that claim.

When it first appeared in 1975 in *Artforum*, the article caused something of a commotion. Among other things, it had dissented from the assumption, everywhere upheld in academic art history and art criticism, that Great Works of Art, the things in the world's top museums, are universally good; I had argued that artistic merit does not automatically translate into universal moral value. The article also challenged the high status given the genre of the female nude, a genre that supposedly constituted one of Art's greatest challenges but which automatically marginalized women artists. Finally, it suggested that some of the heroes of avant-garde art engaged in class exploitation. Far from contesting the chauvinist attitudes of their patrons, they shared those attitudes and gave them powerful visual expression.

In those days, class identity and class interests were rarely mentioned in art-historical discourse. The fact that I spoke of them made some people immediately conclude that I was a Marxist. Although I had been reading writers in the Marxist tradition, I had not actually read Marx, apart from the *Communist Manifesto*, which I had read as an 18-year-old in the middle of the McCarthy era and thought made good sense. Now, in the mid-1970s, I found myself described, even denounced, as a Marxist. The art critic of the New York Times, Hilton Kramer, called me both a Marxist and a Maoist, probably the worst things he could think of to call me. (Kramer) This should give you some idea of how fearful of Marx the American art world had become. I was a little embarrassed to be called a Marxist. I knew that Marx was one of the intellectual giants of the 19th century, and I worried that I was being called a Marxist without having earned the honor. I had heard that Marx's *Capital* was difficult reading and that it was best to do it in a study group. So I joined a *Capital* reading group with the aim of finding out if I really was a Marxist.

This, my first Marxist study group was composed of about seven women, most of them recent PhDs or graduate students in history or anthropology, but also one or two artists and a poet. The first thing we discovered was that Marx was wonderful to read. I remember my surprise at this. Marx had so often been represented as dry, full of technicalities, and of little relevance to the humanities. But I found the philosophical depth, subtlety, and richness of his thought breathtaking. The poet in our group began transcribing what she called "found poems"—passages in Marx's text that read as poetry when written out as lines of verse.

By now, around the middle and later part of the 70s, many of the women I knew were interested in the question of how to relate Marxist to feminist thinking. In New York City, there were several Marxist-Feminist, or Socialist-Feminist, study groups. The late Joan Kelly Gadol, an historian of the Italian Renaissance, was at the center of the group I joined. One of the questions we discussed was what we called the "hyphen problem"—the hyphen in question being the one linking Marxism and feminism. The Marxist tradition had been focused on production and wage labor outside the home in capitalist economies, a focus that all but ignored the unsalaried work that women did in the home, namely the labor of *reproducing* society biologically as well as psychologically and socially. The hyphen question asked whether and how feminism and Marxism could be reconciled, or to put it more broadly, how to frame questions of class, gender, and race in relation to each other. Did one term take precedence over the others? Did your identity as a woman trump your class and race identity? It was Joan who took the Marxist concept of the social relations between the classes and applied it to the categories of gender and race; I used this idea, phrased as "the social relations between the sexes," in "Virility and Domination." I never really looked for a definitive or systematic Marxist or Marxist-feminist procedure of analyzing cultural and social phenomena. But all these discussions helped me think about the world in terms that included clashing interests, complex social relations between the sexes as well as races and classes, and changing uses for art. It helped me conceptualize a world in which art is not a neutral or placid reflection of historical experience but a part of the action. Above all Marxism and feminism insisted on the connectedness between things, between the history of subjective experience and the history of the objective, social world of which that experience is a part.

In the late 70s, my interest shifted to art museums. I was fascinated with the power of museum space to turn ideology into vivid, immediate experience. I will not attempt to summarize that work here except to say that one of the things about museums that interested me most



was the way museums could gender space. In particular the way it masculinized gallery space. My interest in museums continued through several articles and two books, the last one published in 2014, but it had its beginnings in the 70s.

I have been emphasizing how much my writing owed to the fact that I was living through the 70s and was active in a community of politically optimistic and idealistic people, both artists and academics. After the 70s, beginning with the presidency of Ronald Regan, politics in the US took a decided turn to the right. Liberalism fell under attack, and the little bubble of Left optimism that had grown in the 70s, collapsed. I remember feeling disoriented in the new decade—I felt that the constituency to which I belonged and for which I wrote had shrunk away. In the end, I picked myself up and carried on, although more skeptical than before and with less faith in progress. Even so, I think I was fortunate to have been alive in the seventies. It was a great time of learning, and I know that I have drawn from its energy and stimulus ever since. I wish I could end this talk on more of an upbeat note or at least leave you with some words of wisdom. History has a terrible way of dashing one's hopes, and then, when you are near despair, surprising you with bits of good news. As for women, in some parts of the world, they are doing better than ever; in other parts, they are under attack as never before. But I do believe that feminism, far from being over, is still in its early stages.



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