RECLAIMING
FEMALE AGENCY

FEMINIST ART HISTORY AFTER POSTMODERNISM

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INTRODUCTION

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OVER THE PAST three decades, feminist art history has undergone both radical growth and subtle transformation. Originating in women’s political self-discovery, feminist art history in the 1970s aimed to correct historical gender inequities by recovering women’s history and revealing gender distortion in the canonical record. Early feminist art history interrogated and challenged culture as a whole, exposing its biases and hierarchies of value, from the near-monolithic standpoint of an undifferentiated feminist impulse.

In the 1970s and 1980s British and American feminists gradually refined and expanded their original mission to challenge sexist culture. First as independent forerunners and then as heirs of the postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers, we set out at the same time, on different sides of the Atlantic, to question existing systems—above all, patriarchy. Like other feminist scholars, feminist art historians have built our work upon the postmodern precept that the circulation of power in society is not natural but culturally manipulated and directed. This and other postmodern axioms proved to be invaluable tools in the early 1980s and beyond, as the feminist project to deconstruct patriarchal power structures continued, now with more sophisticated theoretical equipment at its disposal.\(^1\)

Another development of the 1980s was the gradual absorption of feminist art history within the academy into the postmodern rubric of gender studies, now broadened to include men’s studies, gay and lesbian perspectives, and queer theory. Under the impetus of poststructuralist theory, the notion of a unitary feminism yielded to feminisms, whose agendas were differentiated by race, class, and ethnicity, and the very concept of gender came to be problematized as a socially constructed entity. As feminist art historians began to recognize the larger scope and complexities of the power relationships that feminism interrogates and challenges, feminist art history came increasingly to situate female experience within a larger framework of multiple and fluid gendered identities and positions, and to consider gender as only one of many factors in a constantly shifting and evolving, often tensely balanced, pattern of power relationships. Yet as feminist art history changed direction, splintering under the impact of postmodern gender studies into differing and contentious theoretical positions, it risked losing its original feminist political urgency.\(^2\)

The first casualty of poststructuralist gender studies was the possibility of women’s agency. In an influential article of 1988, Lisa Tickner claimed that the question was no longer “why are there no great women artists?” but “how are the processes of sexual differentiation played out across the representations of art and art history?” Tickner aligned herself with other British feminists who had moved away from a feminist art history concerned with women’s experiential differences from men to focus instead on their “positional” difference in a “relational system.” Emphasizing that gender is a “semiotic category,” she shifted the discussion away from female agency into a realm that assumes no agency on anyone’s part, only...
(here quoting Griselda Pollock’s definition of patriarchy) “a web of psycho-social relationships which institute a socially significant difference on the axis of sex.” Citing the work of Pollock, Kathleen Adler, and Tamar Garb on Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morisot, and Marie Bashkirtseff as appropriate models for the study of women artists, Tickner advocated the study of the marginal and negotiated place of the woman artist in a particular social system and the ways in which her position as a woman is “repressed, refracted or revealed in her work.”

The critical emphasis of recent decades on the cultural impasse for women has created, we believe, a distorted picture of female participation in culture, one that portrays women as paralyzed within and by an abstract system of social relationships and representational constructs. The current of feminist scholarship and theory that found its touchstones in Freud, Lacan, and Saussure, in systems of psychology and linguistics grounded in masculinist principles, has in effect, if not by intention, reified existing power structures, often producing an elaborate justification of the status quo. More generally, art historians working in the gender studies mode, deferential to postmodern skepticism about the modernist heroizing of individual artists, have focused less and less on the work and agency of individual women artists, shying away especially from the idea of a feminist expression grounded in women’s real life experiences. The result has been the steady erosion and suppression of an activist, reformist feminism within an increasingly theoretical and largely masculinist postmodernism.

Whether in politics or art, women’s agency has been detrimentally circumscribed by the idea that the coherent identity of the category “woman” is a theoretical impossibility. This restriction sprang in part from the crippling prohibition against “essentialism,” whose opponents learned to spot trouble in any text that hinted at the possibility that women as a group might act (or think or behave) in a particular, identifiable way. The idea that there might be an identifiable female point of view in art, first presented in 1970s feminist art history, was doubted even at the outset, but in the 1980s this idea was roundly discredited as “essentialist” by writers attuned to the postmodern precept that “woman” is a social, not a biological, construct.

The anti-essentialist position in turn came under criticism, most effectively from Diana Fuss, who, in an influential book of 1989, pointed out that a fundamental essentialism was actually at work in the theories of social constructionism forged or endorsed by anti-essentialists. Fuss also noted the latter’s virtual invention of an essentialism that in fact few feminists claimed or practiced. Nevertheless, she embraced what has been called the “risk of essence,” pointing to the political value of an essentializing identity claim when coalition politics are practiced, and the political usefulness of thinking of women as a group, even at the expense of minimizing their differences. Defending Luce Irigaray’s strategic use of a “language of essence,” Fuss declared: “The point, for Irigaray, of defining women from an essentialist standpoint is not to imprison women within their bodies but to rescue them from enculturating definitions by men. An essentialist definition of ‘woman’ implies that there will always remain some part of ‘woman’ which resists masculine imprinting and socialization.”

But, of course, essentialism—defined as an unfounded belief in the natural and permanent nature of gender traits and the social positions they mark—is a fundamental characteristic of patriarchy itself. Thus, for many feminist art historians of the 1990s and later, the most productive and influential aspects of anti-essentialist theory have been those that critiqued masculinist essentialisms. Judith Butler, for example, has emphasized gender’s liminality and performative enforcement, in the interest of breaking down totalizing or essentializing worldviews. Similarly, Homi Bhabha has examined the colonial/postcolonial discourse of power from a psychological perspective. Criticizing Edward Said’s argument that colonialist power was maintained through an uncomplicated will and ability to dominate the powerless and passive oppressed, Bhabha points instead to a core ambivalence or unconscious anxiety on the part of the dominators, which threatens their power from the inside and admits the potential of resistance from
the marginalized. Feminist art historians can certainly learn from the example of postcolonial discourse, in which the dominant-and-oppressed model has been replaced with theories, by Bhabha and others, that postulate agency on the part of the repressed and unconscious fear on the part of the dominators, or from Epifanio San Juan Jr., who wants to move beyond language-based theory to concentrate on the histories of particular “subalterns” who have resisted colonial repression.12

Within feminist art history as well, the idea of a history consisting of monolithic patriarchal control over women as passive victims, interrupted by sporadic feminist interventions, has been discredited by many recent writers. Several decades of feminist scholarship have already shown that women have exercised agency as artists, patrons, viewers, and taste-makers. What is different about the new scholarship is that it focuses upon the continuous destabilizing pressure that women’s agency has exerted upon culture: women’s efforts to resist masculinist cultural hegemony produced counterefforts to absorb, counteract, and appropriate their resistances. And some distinctly female points of view, we now know, were so different from the prevailing male paradigms that they could not be comfortably absorbed and assimilated.

The issue of female agency, both its presence and its repression, emerged as a strong current in feminist art-historical literature of the 1990s and has provoked, in our view, the most advanced and fruitful thinking of the present moment. In reaction to the dominant theoretical positions of the 1980s, which can be seen in retrospect to have been conservative positions, many feminist art historians began in the 1990s to look more closely at the agency of specific women in history, uncovering the subversive power they actually wielded, as measured by visible cultural efforts to suppress or neutralize them. The subject of this book, then, is how women attempted to claim power and agency, and how masculinist culture acted and continues to act to negate and neutralize those efforts.

The essays included here trace that dialogue and struggle in Western visual culture from the Renaissance to the present. We begin with the sixteenth century, when women artists and patrons became visible enough to constitute a threatening and destabilizing cultural force, and we focus on literature generated in the 1990s by the visual arts—primarily painting and the graphic arts, but also sculpture, photography, and film. The dialectical discourse between “high art” and “crafts,” so important a part of the feminist art-historical project in the 1970s and 1980s, is no longer so central in the literature, perhaps because it is considered a battle already won. Its resonances nevertheless continue to be heard here in the ongoing critical debates over Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party. Finally, this book is not about, nor could it be about, all cultures. We have focused, as in our previous volumes, on art and artists in Western Europe and North America.13 Such recent artists as Hung Liu and Shirin Neshat are considered from their positions as American artists who act out of a liminal multicultural experience that is specifically Western.

In the sections that follow, we take up some of the major theoretical constructs of 1980s feminist art history that have been challenged and critically reconsidered by the contributors to this volume.

**FEMALE SUBJECTIVE AGENCY AND ITS REPRESSION**

One of the foundational critical tenets in recent decades has been the notion of gendered subjectivity—the idea that every artist or writer responds to the world and represents it in artistic constructions, consciously or unconsciously, from the position of gendered experience. In principle, the gender positions of male and female are equivalent, since social rules for gender performance have been codified in equally elaborate forms for both sexes. In practice, however, it has been only for women that gender expectations conflicted with a desire for cultural achievement or a public voice. In the early modern period, the social casting of the female as passive counterpart to the active male, whether as silent and obedient wife, exemplum of beauty, or sexual object, could not easily accommodate the independent artistic activity of living...
women, especially when they produced images that challenged or complicated cultural norms. (The theoretical situation for female artistic subjectivity has, ironically, not been much better in the postmodern era, when Lacanian psychoanalytic and postfeminist theories have jointly postulated the impossibility of women’s subjective agency in a symbolic order dominated by a masculine universal and in a discourse of power in which, as Others, women have no speaking position.)

The very existence of female artists in the Renaissance was deeply problematic for male artists, as can be seen in the theoretical claims designed to contain them. Women could not produce art, it was said, only children; women were thought to be incapable of divine artistic genius because they were allegedly farther than men from God. When artists such as Sofonisba Anguissola, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Elisabetta Sirani opposed the socially constituted definitions of their sex, producing paintings that reversed normative female models, they set in motion cultural resistance to their agency. It is important to see that a dynamic is involved: the artistic agendas of these painters were formed in part by their personal responses to existing gender structures. Their art initiated a transgressive dialogue with culture that implicitly questioned the status quo, and some of them were culturally punished for their transgressions.

As Mary Garrard shows in “Here’s Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist,” Anguissola, an Italian Renaissance painter, confronted the seeming impossibility in the sixteenth century of presenting an image of a female self that could be interpreted as active subject rather than passive object, as primarily the image of an empowered artist and not a beautiful woman. Her *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola* is, Garrard argues, a picture that thematizes this dilemma, for Anguissola has constructed an image that seems to authorize Campi (Anguissola’s teacher), yet slyly subordinates him both to her own painted face on the easel and to the woman outside the frame who painted this picture, whose presence is invoked by gazes and whose “perspective encompasses the whole scene.” In this work, Anguissola took a subtle course, exaggerating masculinist typologies of female images to the point of parody and gentle ridicule. In *The Chess Game*, she quietly championed the alternative values of female kinship networks. Her reformulations were subtle and sometimes polyvalent; that they might also be interpreted as consistent with dominant gender models may explain how their subversive thrust could have been ignored for so long.

In seventeenth-century Italy, Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabetta Sirani reacted against models of sexualized or pacified females, models so predominant in the art of their time that even biblical or mythical heroines such as Judith or Cleopatra were routinely disempowered. First Gentileschi, then Sirani (perhaps in emulation of Artemisia’s example) produced images of aggressively agile women whose ability to act and accomplish deeds is emphasized and even imaginatively enlarged. In “The Antique Heroines of Elisabetta Sirani,” Babette Bohn examines Sirani as one of an unusually large number of female artists, writers, and musicians active in early modern Bologna, noting that Sirani chose to depict female protagonists from ancient history who modeled virtues, such as courage and heroism, that were atypical in images of women.

Like Anguissola, and also like her own Bolognese predecessor Lavinia Fontana, Sirani deliberately eschewed eroticized female images. She offers an exceptionally empowered Timoclea, a formidable heroine Judith, and an image of the Roman matron Portia proving her courage rather than the more common scene of her suicide. Another famous suicide, Cleopatra, was depicted by several Bolognese women artists; Sirani and Fontana present Cleopatra as a fully clothed and dignified woman, in sharp divergence from the normative eroticized temptress. Bohn argues persuasively that Bologna provided an unusually supportive and inspiring environment for the creative and intellectual achievements of women; their sheer numbers fostered an unusually receptive public and vice versa.
By contrast, the especially transgressive power of Artemisia Gentileschi’s art has brought forth cultural repression from her day to ours, as Mary Garrard and Sheila ffolliott demonstrate in their essays. In “Artemisia’s Hand,” Garrard focuses on the strong hands and forceful gestures of Artemisia’s depicted female characters, in order to demonstrate the artist’s abiding interest in expressing female agency and to address the connoisseurship problem of authorship, that is, the artist’s “hand.” Garrard points to recent attributions to the artist that, in effect if not intention, work to replace the image of an empowered Artemisia with a more conventional feminized identity, as expressed through putative self-representations. Not incidentally, these paintings, whose attributions to Artemisia are here rejected, show female characters with unusually weak hands or none at all. Against the tendency of both Artemisia’s contemporaries and modern art historians to minimize and suppress Artemisia’s agency, whether real or figured in her art, Garrard adduces three new examples, in works by or about Artemisia, in which the painter signals her artistic presence to us through subtle and witty gestures of the hand.

In “Learning to Be Looked At: A Portrait of (the Artist as) a Young Woman in Agnès Merlet’s Artemisia,” ffolliott shows how the contemporary French filmmaker Merlet, in making her film on Artemisia, was impelled to sexualize and distort the artist’s persona, just as her male predecessors had done. This time, however, it was accomplished through the visually persuasive medium of cinema. ffolliott shows how Merlet’s filmic devices work to contain Gentileschi, reinscribing her within traditional viewing structures as object of the male gaze rather than as authoritative subject of the film. She quotes the filmmaker’s avowed intention to present the artist as “a great romantic heroine,” whose “destiny is to learn about passion in a painful way,” and points to the film’s operatic devices that support this vision. Yet, as ffolliott notes, Merlet also makes mischievous use of art history, employing and distorting the Vasarian model of master-pupil artist genealogy, in which the pupil surpasses his teacher, to position Artemisia between two male-artist rivals, her father-teacher and her rapist-“teacher,” whose dual authorities she is never permitted (in the film) to challenge or escape.

Throughout history, it would seem, the more powerfully a woman asserted her agency, the more vigorous was its repression. Marie de’ Medici, queen of France during the rule of her husband, Henri IV, and one of the grandest female art patrons in Western history, is herself commemorated in the cycle of paintings she commissioned for the Luxembourg Palace. Yet, as Geraldine Johnson shows, in “Pictures Fit for a Queen: Peter Paul Rubens and the Marie de’ Medici Cycle,” a conflict emerged in that cycle between the discourse of allegorical female nudes that Rubens habitually employed and the message of her own heroic agency that the queen wished to project in her effort to regain power from her son Louis XIII. The queen’s image in the paintings is compromised by double-edged feminine signifiers, such as the exposed female breast, meant as positive and powerful yet read as negative and dangerous, interpretatively downgraded by male viewers in general and by Marie de’ Medici’s critics in particular into tropes of female seductiveness and vanity. In Johnson’s analysis, the Medici cycle exemplifies the “complicated and often contradictory notions of the nature of female sexuality and its relationship to power.”

Over the course of his work for Marie de’ Medici, Rubens seems to have modified his iconography and imagery to suit the queen’s wishes, yet as Johnson points out, given the delicacy of her adversary being her son, the most that she could triumph over was her own gender and its perceived limitations. In the Presentation of the Portrait, Henri IV views Marie de’ Medici in a mirror-like portrait—probably intended, from her perspective, to express the idea that he sees himself and his own virtues in her, a way of supporting her claim to succeed him. Her strong gaze and the assertive role implied by the arrangement would have ideally fulfilled the conditions for representation’s ability to confer and legitimize power, had she been male. Yet these features of the picture worked
against her because they could be conformed to a gender stereotype: Marie de' Medici's face was compared by contemporary critics to the deceitful and evil head of Medusa, who turns men to stone.

In “The Portrait of the Queen: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s Marie-Antoinette en chemise,” Mary Sheriff also deals with the suppression of a powerful female historical subject and the complex relationship that existed between politics, gender, and representation within the French monarchy. While conflicts of will and style between Marie de' Medici and Rubens were resolved to the queen’s political detriment, the accord between Queen Marie-Antoinette and her painter Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun was considerably more harmonious. Yet the painter may have served her queen all too well. Sheriff examines the genesis and reception of Vigée-Lebrun’s portrait of Marie-Antoinette en chemise (1783) in relation to accepted traditions of representing French queens. In contrast to portraits of French kings, which seamlessly constituted and legitimized their absolutist authority, portraits of queens normally conformed to Salic law. Provisions of this law excluded females from royal succession, presenting them as dependent wives with no power or property of their own, and with attire and attributes that mirrored their identity as the king’s possession and progenitor of his dynasty.

Vigée-Lebrun’s transgressive portrait of Marie-Antoinette, painted in accord with the private tastes of the queen and her powerful Hapsburg mother, Marie-Thérèse, presented her as a private individual en chemise, an image that mirrored the intimate private life at Trianon that Marie-Antoinette had defiantly created for herself. The portrait had to be withdrawn from the Salon because of inflamed public reactions to its informality and perceived immodesty, as well as inflated public perceptions of the foreign-born queen’s power. In Sheriff’s reading, Marie-Antoinette’s sexual body was seen to corrupt the body politic. The Austrian-born queen brought alien style (English gardens and the chemise) into the heart of French sacred space; she offended further by feminizing that space, both in the gender of her preferred guests and in the lesbian sexuality rumored to have been practiced at Trianon. Her embrace of the robe en chemise and her preference for escaping to a female social world provided fuel for her enemies, and the portrait precipitated a host of libelous charges from the court, ranging from extravagance to sexual promiscuity, tribadism, and even incest.

As Sheriff explains, the queen’s mortal body became a symbol of aristocratic vice and sexual deviance, and she herself became an early scapegoat for the monarchy’s moral corruption and decline. Jacques-Louis David’s quick sketch of Marie-Antoinette on the way to her execution effectively countered Vigée-Lebrun’s image of the queen as a powerful nonconformist, offering instead “a public woman vanquished,” stripped of her power and made to exhibit behavior appropriate to feminine and aristocratic stereotypes—as a lesson, perhaps, to women who attempt to overstep the bounds of their prescribed and “natural” roles.

Taken as a group, these early modern examples demonstrate the risks, for women, of trying to claim power through self-representation—at least when a male viewer is posited. Marie-Antoinette’s image as the “tribade of Trianon” may have been admired by her female followers, but it fostered her downfall with the larger masculine and heterosexist public. The quietly feminist paintings of Sofonisba Anguissola and Elisabetta Sirani may have evoked pride in the small circle of women who saw them, yet these artists’ strategies to escape sexualization under the masculinist gaze had, in order to succeed, to be nuanced and intentionally ambiguous, perhaps deliberately kept just beneath the threshold of risk. Anguissola relied on semiotic ambiguity, embedding her claim of artistic agency within conventional, but polysemous, emblems of feminine virtue (the virginals), while Sirani cloaked a vision of female triumph in the garments of antique heroic prototypes. Artemisia Gentileschi’s more strident assertions were dealt harder blows, as measured in near-hysterical efforts, both in her day and our own, to sexualize, distort, or otherwise suppress the empowered, virilized women represented in her images and by her authorial identity.

As these essays show, women artists and public
figures who seek agency through art do not occupy immutable positions defined by permanent gender structures; rather, they enter and affect gendered discourses of representation whose standards of what is "natural" or appropriate are so precarious, so inherently unstable, that their rules and codes must be perpetually policed. Every action, every image, that threatens the masculinist status quo apparently must be resisted. The most persistent strategy of suppression has been to eroticize strong women, in an effort to limit and demonize their power. Although this has not had the effect of stopping women from claiming cultural agency, it has shaped the expressive substance of their aesthetic performances in art and public action.

Indeed, as this collection of essays demonstrates, the threat of female power circulates around all representations constructed by and about women. It is masculine fear of this threat—not so much what women do as what they might do—that makes women artists both especially vulnerable and especially dangerous. They enter a masculine art scene preconditioned to dismiss them on arrival, as "merely" women whose production is to be judged apart, who are either too beautiful and virtuous to do heavy (artistic) lifting or too tainted by eroticism and sexuality to be taken seriously as artists. We must learn to regard these slights of the female not as the disdain of the inferior by those justly ensconced in power, but as expressions of fear (albeit of phantasms, such as the castrated and castrating woman), which have turned into strategies for those insecure about their power. The essays gathered here offer evidence for the working postulate that patriarchy wants to inscribe itself most forcefully at the times when it is most under threat.

In "Depoliticizing Women: Female Agency, the French Revolution, and the Art of Boucher and David," Erica Rand reveals the extent to which fears of female power and agency transcended boundaries of class and politics to inform images that were produced both before and after the social upheavals of the French Revolution. She reverses the traditional oppositional stance of Boucher and David to demonstrate the strategies that permitted both to "defuse female agency." Boucher eroticized the female image for masculine visual pleasure, naturalizing his female protagonists in effective response to the period's widespread fear of women's cultural power, especially as mistresses and salonières. In his Venus and Vulcan, for example, Boucher displays the goddess's body for the viewer's gaze, presenting female agency in a negative light: women who deploy their bodies opportunistically and decadently are implicitly indicted. Similarly, David's presentation of women who transgressed the boundaries of traditional gender roles served a prescriptive republican agenda, functioning to direct women away from the arena of public politics and back to the private sphere of motherhood and family.

In the Death of Marat, for example, the self-constructed image of Charlotte Corday as a political heroine of high principle is both erased and politically neutralized. Though she herself is not seen in this image of the man she assassinated, her bodiless presence is nevertheless an important and carefully orchestrated aspect of the painting, taking the form of the letter that Marat holds, purposefully edited to characterize her as a deceptive and unnatural woman and to discredit her own interpretation of her act. In the context of revolutionary-era fears of women's political activity, Rand argues that David, "a delegate to the National Convention and one of its primary crafters of gender ideology," used related tactics in other images to deauthorize and redirect Revolutionary female political activism. Thus, the political engagement of the Sabine women and the contemporary women of the October riots is presented in David's imagery as wholly framed and motivated by their commitment to preserving the private values of home and family.

The question of whether or to what extent David was motivated by an antifeminist political agenda, and how successful that agenda may have been, has been recently complicated by Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, who, in "Nudité à la grecque in 1799," examines the controversial reception of David's Intervention of the Sabine Women and concludes that, whatever David's
intentions may have been, he was unable to control the readings of his painting in his own time. Pointing to the tension in the painting between fashionable, scantily dressed women and male nudes who “now appeared undressed” and “as objects of women’s vision,” Grigsby asserts that David’s tableau newly and shockingly foregrounded the female spectator as a “viewer of male flesh,” a viewer whose gaze was capable of compromising the masculine beau ideal.

The fluid meanings of sartorial signifiers pictured in the painting further complicated its readings and confused its message. For during the Directory period, while men were increasingly covering their bodies to excess, women were electing a mode of Greek attire that revealed the female body and was seen by contemporaries as an exhibitionist and immoral fashion choice. When Directory women appropriated men’s cultural signifiers through antique dress, they were perceived as sexualizing that dress and thereby debasing Republican iconography, threatening to corrupt the (fraternal) Republic by depriving its symbols of their cultural and political power.

Grigsby’s analysis provides an important intervention in a dominant feminist discourse, one that has assumed the absolute and gendered separation between public and private spheres during and following the French Revolution, with David as the central figure and cultural enforcer of this separation. David’s inability to control contemporary readings of the Sabines as a result of real women’s intervention and co-option of sartorial symbolism is a revelation that would seem, on the face of it, to refute Rand’s more traditional feminist claim, which uses intention rather than reception to uncover gender politics in specific historical periods and situations. In our view, however, these readings support and do not invalidate one another. For both writers would surely agree that cultural rhetoric and imagery designed to reinforce conservative positions about women’s place is likely to be a defensive response to a threatening assertion of power and agency. In the words of Grigsby, “Modern scholarship that takes for granted women’s role as representatives of the private sphere is . . . repeating a reactionary prescription, not a reality of post-Revolutionary society.”

Feminist analyses such as Rand’s, however, reveal the recurring pattern of these reactionary prescriptions in every era and the recurring double bind: women assert a tenuous freedom that never becomes real power and whose effects are thus easily manipulated out of our received histories. Although the appropriation of Greek dress by women during the Directory may have briefly interfered with political readings of David’s image, for the past two hundred years it is the “reactionary prescription” assigned to David’s narrative by the conservative party line that has been consistently attached to the Sabines, disguising the diversity of competing gender positions in his own period in the interest of a patriarchy that has the power to naturalize, control, and rewrite the historical metanarrative over time. This power makes the feminist political analysis of the images and their cultural operation accurate still. For no matter how many competing voices and strands may have existed and interacted in any period, it is the conservative position, useful for supporting the continuing status quo of the patriarchal political and family structure, that is most apt to survive in the historical record.

In “Conduct Unbecoming: Daumier and Les Bas-Bleus,” Janis Bergman-Carton broadens the limited typologies used by earlier feminist scholars to categorize and discuss women and their cultural representations in nineteenth-century France (primarily courtesans and women victimized into prostitution) to include the “woman of letters” and the “woman of ideas,” women who were referred to derogatorily during the period as bas-bleus, or “bluestockings.” The subversive power and potentially destabilizing presence of these women of letters in the social, political, and intellectual life of France during the period of the July Monarchy is revealed and measured, she shows, by the efforts that were made to denigrate and discredit them. In particular, Bergman-Carton encourages her readers to look directly at the gendered meanings of Daumier’s caricatures of the bas-bleus and at the role these images played in helping to dis-
courage social and political change for women in his era and beyond. The bluestockings were ridiculed and satirized by Daumier as sexually deviant home-wreckers and child-neglecters, antithetical to the feminine ideal. Modern Daumier scholars have argued that the artist himself was not against feminist reform per se, but rather aimed his satire at its "sententious high priestesses and camp followers." Yet, as Bergman-Carton succinctly observes: "Representing women writers not as women who write but as sexless hags and promiscuous shrews is not a neutral act. To ignore the cultural and political content of these images by studying them as benign scenes of everyday life is not a neutral act either."

If Daumier's nineteenth-century Bas-Bleus lithographs represent the power of popular imagery to repress female political agency, the twentieth-century reception of Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party could be said to represent a related phenomenon in opposite terms: the power of politically motivated critics to repress female agency expressed in art. In her essay "The 'Sexual Politics' of The Dinner Party: A Critical Context," Amelia Jones examines critical responses to the work that has become the "central icon" of the early feminist movement in the United States, a highly visible and controversial monument that was wildly popular yet sharply criticized by both conservative antifeminists and diverse feminist factions. Advocates of avant-garde high modernism faulted The Dinner Party's populist, "low-art" appeal to the masses, its perceived lack of "quality," and its association with women's tastes and domestic crafts. The strategies of journalists were not unlike those of Daumier, to repress by caricature and ridicule; thus, descriptions of The Dinner Party linked it with the appalling values of kitsch art and emphasized the "vulgarity" and "bad taste" of the vulviform images seen in the thirty-nine large plates on the dinner table. So offensive were Chicago's abstracted images of female genitalia to masculinist political conservatives that The Dinner Party was "hysterically denounced for its obscenity" by right-wing members of Congress. What was in bad taste for these critics, Jones leads us to see, was Chicago's insistence on her right to use the female body, not for masculine viewing pleasure but for feminist political expression.

Some feminists, on the other hand, found The Dinner Party's overt female imagery to represent an essentializing reduction of women—including "bluestockings" such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf—to a biological feminine dubiously limited to wombs and vaginas. Characterizing this critique as insufficiently informed about the theory and practice of 1970s feminist activists and artists, Jones argues that supposedly "essentialist" artists such as Chicago and Miriam Schapiro were in reality reclaiming degraded "feminine" forms for political purposes. It was a crucial first step for feminism, Jones says, "to mark gender as informative of cultural practice, to refuse the masculinist notion of 'universality' that guaranteed the privileging of male-invented forms and themes as neutrally aesthetic," and to create a self-affirming "women's art" that "became a unifying factor, a means of binding together an infinitely variable group of practices." For the pioneers, this meant the recuperation of the female body long held hostage by men, so that it might be turned into a group-specific signifier for women, rather than about them.

The early feminists' idealist vision of a sisterhood that transcended the barriers of class, race, and sexual preference was perhaps inherently unstable. Examining critiques of The Dinner Party came from Hispanic women, women of color, lesbians, and those critical of Chicago's personal celebrity in a collaborative feminist project, Jones exposes "the pitfalls of identity politics" that have plagued feminism increasingly since the 1970s. Poststructuralist feminists criticized The Dinner Party for its reduction of feminism to a biological common denominator; for these critics, its gender-universalizing was its weakness. But criticism also came from feminist groups who saw no place, or an inappropriately marked place, at the dinner table for lesbians and women of color—from this viewpoint, the project was unsatisfactory because it was not universal enough.

The sharply polarized reception of The Dinner Party, especially from feminists, forms an important and instructive chapter in the history of feminism. For
ironically, in the late twentieth century, women seem to have done to ourselves what artists like Boucher, David, and Daumier did to their female contemporaries: using or allowing imagery to divide women into camps of "good" and "bad," right- and wrong-minded, on the basis of feminist or antifeminist propriety and theoretical decorum, and thus helping to break up the collective power of women who wield agency as a political group.

CHALLENGING MASCULINIST PSYCHOANALYSIS

For many, though not all, feminists, psychoanalysis has been an especially problematic methodological category. Feminism and psychoanalysis are, on the surface, at odds with each other because of the strongly patriarchal nature of Freudian psychology, in particular Freud's definition of human sexuality according to a masculine model. Perhaps more patriarchalist than Freud, and certainly more influential in the postmodern era, was Jacques Lacan, who began as a Freudian psychoanalyst but grounded himself in structuralism and semiotics. Lacan famously pronounced that the symbolic order is patriarchal, with the phallus as the transcendental signifier, and that the unconscious is structured by language, which is masculine. Lacan's theories were challenged by French feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and especially Luce Irigaray; they were more vigorously contested by American and British feminists, notably Nancy Chodorow, Jane Gallop, and to some extent, Alice Jardine. At the same time, Lacanian theory was embraced in France by the women who formed the psych et po group, and it has continued to be the dominant model for many British feminist thinkers. Despite its enduring appeal to some feminists, however, Lacanian theory would radically repress female agency, and it stands as a hostile interdiction to activist feminism.

In "Louise Bourgeois's Femmes-Maisons: Confronting Lacan," Julie Nicoletta presents the sculptor Bourgeois as an artist who critiqued Lacan's ideas about gender and the unconscious. Nicoletta explains that, in her art of the 1940s and 1950s, when Lacan was writing his theories, Bourgeois was dealing with the same issues that he addressed—specifically, gender differentiation in the context of Freudian psychology. Although Bourgeois may not have read Lacan until the 1970s, Nicoletta suggests that she is likely to have known his ideas (and perhaps Lacan himself) as early as the 1930s, when they participated in the same intellectual and artistic circles in Paris. As if in direct refutation of Lacan's theoretical pronouncements about the masculine nature of the unconscious and the symbolic order, Bourgeois expressed interest in overcoming patriarchal dominance through the combination of the sexes. As she put it in an interview, "We are all vulnerable in some way and we are all male-female."

Nicoletta first examines Bourgeois's Femmes-Maisons paintings of the 1940s, which present images of nude females with houses that cover their heads and sometimes their bodies, as ambivalent expressions of woman's relation to the house as a symbol of the domestic. Some of the Femmes-Maisons express anxiety and a desire for escape; one hints at female contentment in her social role. Yet, for Bourgeois, the house may be not only a social but also a psychic signifier. In the context of Nicoletta's argument, it is suggestive that the sculptor chose houses, which in Freudian psychology often represent the psyche, or whole self, or even the unconscious. Does she address in these images woman's confinement in men's (Lacan's) ideas? Or does Bourgeois feminize the symbolic order defined by Lacan as masculine? In either case, she would seem to practice gynesis, the term used by Alice Jardine (with whom Nicoletta compares Bourgeois) for "the putting into discourse of 'woman' as that process beyond the Cartesian Subject, the Dialectics of Representation, or Man's Truth."

Nicoletta points out further that, whereas Lacan insists upon the linguistic structuring of the unconscious and explores the mind through language, Bourgeois explores problems of communication through the visual or the semiotic, with a particular penchant for gender duality and ambiguity. This aligns her, in Nicoletta's reading, with Kristeva's idea of the semi-