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Review

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Book Reviews

ISAAK, JO ANNA. *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996, xiv + 225 pp., numerous b&w illus., \$65.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

ADAMS, PARVEEN. *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Differences*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996, xi + 169 pp., 19 b&w illus., \$59.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

These two new books released by Routledge, well known for its many titles in Women's Studies, deal with substantive issues in the interpretation of art. Both works explore the role that gender plays in the psychology of art (dealing with both making and viewing), complicating current philosophical distinctions between the aesthetic and cognitive, and providing new insights into basic topics in the history and psychology of perception, representation, and disinterestedness.

Isaak's collection of essays is part of a new series by Routledge entitled "Re Visions: Critical Studies in the History and Theory of Art," edited by Jon Bird and Lisa Tickner, a series that acknowledges the academic mainstream's acceptance of the "new" art history and seeks to advance the dialogue about art into uncharted realms. The editors' twofold goal of tying theoretical discussions to *actual* works of art in *clear and accessible terminology* is successfully realized in Isaak's book. She provides numerous examples of women's art from the past two decades that range over various media and styles, and are gleaned from several continents (commendable in its advance beyond nationalistic boundaries). There is a richness worth mining here. For the newcomer to the field, she provides an invaluable overview of the diversity of women's art, categorizing the array of works under the headings of resistance, mother-daughter collaborations, and mappings (in terms of both the earth/the land and the female body). Several artists of color are included (Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, Lorraine O'Grady), and two artists offer alternatives to

the 1992 celebration of Columbus's "discovery" of America (Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and Elaine Reichek). For the experienced revisionist, there are new and unfamiliar artists in addition to standards like Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, and Nancy Spero (about whom Isaak wrote a monograph in 1987). One essay, for example, elaborates upon the differences in production by women artists before and after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Isaak is particularly insightful in analyzing the works without placing them in the context of Western feminist theorizing; her familiarity with the artists—her visits to Russia and actual dialogue with the women about their work—facilitates an understanding of claims they have made indicating that their work is *not* feminist (and in some instances, that it is actually *antifeminist*).

The impetus for the book was an exhibition of the same name organized in 1982, "The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter." Although humor is the focus and motivation for the book, one should not expect anything like a philosophical analysis of humor that includes Plato and Kant, that reviews the superiority and incongruity theories of humor, or that questions the claims and assumptions made by the writers Isaak chooses to set up as foundational in chapter 1. Her approach is primarily psychoanalytic (as is Parveen Adams's); she brings together Mikhail Bakhtin's borrowing of Rabelais's theory of laughter as *misrule*, Roland Barthes's notion of laughter as *libidinal license*, Julia Kristeva's concept of *jouissance*, Lacan's ideas on feminine sexuality, and most importantly, Freud's writings on humor: "Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstance" (Isaak, p. 14, from Freud, *On Humor*, 1927). For Freud, the triumph of humor lies in the ego's invulnerability, evidenced primarily by humorists, criminals, and narcissistic women. The narcissistic woman, like the criminal, is outside the law. (Motherhood is the "cure" for such a woman—a way for her to overcome this "natural" condition and

learn to love on the masculine model.) Artistic representation allows her to explore this “space” outside the law, beyond the bounds of the hierarchical patriarchy. Going beyond the law results in the freedom to experiment with investigations of her *self* to upset the hierarchy (along the lines of Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque), to define her *own* sexuality (*not* as object of the male gaze nor as created by the male artist), to play, to be funny, and to delight in the power of the female body (*jouissance*). Humor is the subversive strategy of the revolution; laughter is its expression.

This is the theoretical basis that propels Isaak’s decisions about the meanings of the works of art she canvases. Like Adams and other well-read feminist art critics and film theorists, her reliance upon the “fathers” of psychoanalytic theory, both old and new, is unquestioning. For some philosophers, this may preclude a sympathetic reading. The practice of uncritically quoting snippets of text either to inspire or to “confirm” hypothetical interpretations of works of art gives one the sense that an oblique reference to Freud or a direct quote from Lacan can yield a plausible “meaning” that can rescue any piece of mediocre art. Not that quality is ever an explicit issue; aesthetic *value* is never discussed and is definitely secondary to any and all meanings—political or otherwise—attributed to these works. Furthermore, father-figures dominate both texts. In what could be construed as ample opportunity for the input of French feminist thought, Isaak’s essays include only minimal references to Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous, while Adams ignores all three.

Some art is just not as interesting as some psychoanalytic interpretations would lead us to believe and—crucial to Isaak’s book—many artworks are not as humorous as she would like us to think. A case in point is Hannah Wilke’s final artwork, *Intra-Venus*, which documents her personal struggle with cancer. Whereas Isaak sees humor in a photograph of a dying Wilke with bandages, intravenous tubes, and a bowl of fruit on her head (supposedly posed as Carmen Miranda), some viewers might prefer a discussion of what counts as *failed* humor, or black humor, or how art might be humorous and revolutionary, yet fail to be subversive. In reading about subversive art (and for some theorists, *all* postmodern art is subversive), I was reminded of a claim made by Rita Felski in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*: “The problem with theories which attempt to locate resistance in every micropolitical strategy, in every libidinal impulse, is that subversion is located everywhere and nowhere.”

Adams’s readings of art are similarly *proscriptive*. (She is one of the leading proponents of this approach, having co-founded the psychoanalytic feminist journal *m/f* and co-edited it from 1978 to 1986.) At times, her interpretations openly clash with

artists’ intentions, as in her treatment of “the emptiness of the image,” documenting Orlan’s reconstructive surgeries. Orlan is the French performance artist who has videotaped nine operations altering her face to resemble portions of portraits of ideal beauty as depicted by Leonardo, Botticelli and other “great masters” of the past. While Orlan insists that her performances are (among other things) about discouraging women from undergoing surgeries that promise unattainable ideals of beauty, Adams interprets them as Orlan’s need to create (literally and metaphorically) a *new space*—between the skin and what lies beneath, between the customary and the horrifying unknown, between the inside and the outside:

It is here on the operating table that castration occurs; not in the act of cutting, not in the drama of the knife, not in the barely suppressed frenzy of it all, but in the space which is opened up. ... Something flies off; this something is the security of the relation between the inside and the outside. It ceases to exist. ... There is an emptying out of the object. (Adams, pp. 153–154)

Thus the documentation—representations of Orlan in video form—reveals, after all is said and done, the *emptiness* of the image. This interpretation is inextricably tied to the frequently invoked Freudian vocabulary of the internal and the external, used by psychoanalysis “as an index of and a means for describing mental states” (Adams, p. 147). Whether it serves to elucidate works of art is another matter, however, especially in light of its inextricable tie to the concept of “castration.” Serious questions come to mind when a feminist interpretive framework calls a woman undergoing surgery at the hands of a male surgeon “castration.” These problems do not seem to occur to Adams.

Adams is the more theoretical of the two authors; she openly states that despite flaws in some of the details of its arguments, psychoanalytic theory is “not a moribund set of propositions,” but rather it “retains an overwhelming explanatory strength in relation to questions of sexual difference and representation” (Adams, p. 1). The first five essays in the Adams volume raise questions about masculinity, femininity, the positing of heterosexuality as a norm, and the central concepts of psychoanalysis—castration, the Oedipal complex, and the phallus—as they can be applied to Freud’s texts, to the 1925–1930 writings of Helene Deutsch on women and reproduction, and more recently, to Catherine MacKinnon’s controversial views advocating legal regulation of pornography. Adams argues that “far from decrying women, it shows what is at stake in their making a case for the *flexibility* and power of psychoanalysis” (Adams, pp. 1–2, emphasis added). In the following six chapters, this claim is “tested” in reference to artworks by Mary Kelly (always a favorite of feminist psychoana-

lytic art critics), the 1960 film *Peeping Tom* by Michael Powell, the paintings of Francis Bacon, a photograph of three nude and bald women entitled *The Three Graces* by Della Grace, and the operations of Orlan.

Crucial and important to these discussions is the role of *desire* as it gets played out in a psychoanalytic version of the reception and cognition of art. Reading about the “emptiness” of the image and its implied unfulfillment of desire can be thought provoking if, for instance, one keeps aesthetic theories of disinterestedness or psychological distancing in mind. Philosophers might respond to the author’s focus on desire by rethinking their notion of “disinterestedness,” which unequivocally seeks to *suppress* desire in the experiencing of art. Conversely, followers of Freud might acquaint themselves with the notion of disinterestedness (which lies “outside” the framework of psychoanalysis) in order to extend their interpretive boundaries beyond an analysis of meaning and into the realm of art’s *aesthetic* value. This would really demonstrate *flexibility* as well as account for an entire body of work that is nonrepresentational in nature, work never discussed by either author. (Isaak and Adams document *only* representational art.)

An especially interesting theme in both books (and in the psychoanalytic approach in general) is the analysis of the disease known as hysteria. Hysteria became a common mode of diagnosing aberrant (“insane”) behavior in an overwhelming majority of female patients in the practice of Freud and his colleagues, J. M. Charcot and Josef Breuer. Initially appearing unrelated to contemporary women’s art or, more broadly speaking, the general history of art, a closer look reveals findings to the contrary: “It is an atrocity, but one is forced to consider hysteria, as it was illustrated at the Salpêtrière [clinic], in the last third of the nineteenth century, as a chapter of the history of art” (Isaak, p. 187, quoting Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de L’Hystérie*, 1982).

Salpêtrière was a “lock hospital” in Paris, which—by the 1870s—housed four thousand women and approximately one hundred of their children. It provided a resource of study for a variety of purposes, one of which was providing the “proof” for the newly diagnosed disease, hysteria. Freud’s work on hysteria began with a rejection of Charcot’s insistence on the *visual* in the diagnostic process—he distrusted symptoms “‘read off’ the body in so unmediated a fashion” (Isaak, p. 186). Instead, Freud offered the now familiar theory that what was below the surface (the unseen) played the greatest role in explaining the hysteric’s problems: her hidden sexual desires and her transference of feelings from parent to others (documented in the famous case of Freud’s patient, Dora). At the point at which Freud failed *fully* to capture the feminine self as characterized by his theories, theorist

Jacques Lacan has stepped in to extend Freud’s analysis to the question of woman *as* representation. Not only do feminist theorists consider artworks by contemporary artists in which they depict *themselves*, other women, their bodies, and their sexualities decipherable under Lacan’s system, they also see it as a means of tracing the representation *of* women in visual art. Examples include the genre of portraits labeled “madwomen,” the erotic nature of political paintings revisualizing the French Revolution (bare-breasted women at the barricades or strewn about on the ground); André Brouillet’s 1887 painting, “A Clinical Lecture at the Salpêtrière,” which depicts a swooning, half-dressed woman, held up by Charcot—her back arched and breasts protruding; and statements by the surrealist painters Aragon and Breton indicating their desire to “celebrate” the hysterics at Salpêtrière as “the greatest poetic discovery of the nineteenth century” (Isaak, p. 192). Adams invokes Lacan’s notion of *anamorphosis*, which he utilized in explaining the art of Holbein and Rubens, to understand the performances of Orlan (to whom an entire French journal of mental health was devoted, directed to the question of whether or not she was insane):

At issue, in an analogic or anamorphic form, is the effort to point once again to the fact that what we seek in the illusion is something in which the illusion as such in some way transcends itself, destroys itself, by demonstrating that it is only there as signifier. (Adams, p. 128, quoting Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*)

Surely the emptiness of the image—the illusion transcended and destroyed—bears importance for basic philosophical issues in representation (re-presentation). What would it mean, for instance, for an “empty” image to re-present the original?

It remains to be seen whether Lacanian and feminist extensions of Freud can rescue psychoanalytic theory from its detractors and provide sufficient explanations for subversive strategies and sexual differences embedded in representational art. These are important books, however, for anyone interested in opening up the dialogue between disciplines on these matters and about interpretation in general.

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