

Abstraction and Difference

Griselda Pollock



Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951, 49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

Symposium Proceeding *Women in Abstraction. Another History of Abstraction in the 20th Century.*

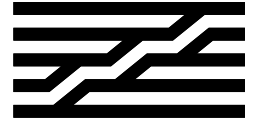
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Abstract painter Bridget Riley (b.1931) remains faithful to the still-nascent project of abstraction. In *Art and Sexual Politics*, Riley declared, however, that women artists need feminism – “this hysteria” – like ‘they need a hole in the head’. I refute, but understand, her position. In the 20th century climate of gender-exclusionary modernism, to conjoin *art, sex* and *politics* was transgressive. Worse, gender was suicidal for any artist-woman who wanted only to be seen as an artist tout court. Feminism has made gender trouble unquestionably necessary.

What did *modernity* mean for artists redefining the condition and subjectivities of *Woman* (Idea) and women (psycho-social beings) as they engaged with the transformative potentialities of modern art and, specifically, abstraction? Did abstraction *emerge* but creatively *diverge* because of multiple, significant, and enriching difference(s) articulated formally and aesthetically even by artists, like Riley, who distanced themselves from any gender-talk? Should we understand abstraction as an inquiry into art and different ways of being that took artists, working in the Western art traditions, beyond inherited formulations of gender that had hitherto, under pagan Classical and Christian representationalism, *figuratively* articulated hierarchies of gender difference? Was not abstraction in Western art’s histories undeniably co-created, yet always *differently*, by each woman and man who themselves never conformed to the ideological appellation *men* and *women* or to heterocratic normativity? Who and what would the artists who embraced abstraction *become* through its practice? What would be inscribed by their art through working with both a modern consciousness and modernist aesthetic formulations – created singularly but often side by side by women and men, black and white, straight, queer, trans, diversely neuro-sensory and geopolitically and religiously-ethnically-historically diverse and those defining themselves beyond any such confinements?

These questions indicate the scale of the theoretical and historical challenge for rethinking art, abstraction and difference that needs to be articulated. *Feminist* does not signify a unitary position. I inhabit one location in a vast, international, ever-morphing feminist landscape. My theory of difference draws on



different psychoanalytical theories of the formations of *subjectivity, the symbolic and the aesthetic* rather than on philosophical or social theories of *gender and sexuality*.

Even as artworks are exhibited under the sign 'women' as an undifferentiated category, viewers discover the *complexity of difference* as each embodied, psycho-sexual, geo-ethically situated, historically-positioned artistic practice enlarges the aesthetic script of modern art and reveals the multiple, modern subjectivities. Exhibitions stage the work. Thus might we learn ourselves through what these art practices by diverse women impressed into our culture *in, of and from the many feminine(s)* that these artists uncovered or refuted in themselves, artists whose insights been systematically repressed by a selective, gender and race supremacist, exclusionary story of modern art that is a betrayal of modernity by denying the richness and significance of difference.

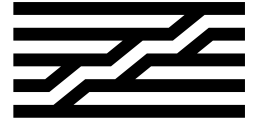
I now offer two case-studies.

1.

I recently re-engaged with 1950s New York Painting² to analyse how the experienced abstract painter, Lee Krasner (1908-1984) confronted the shocking surfacing of a monstrous figurative presence in her painting, *Prophecy* (July, 1956) and, within one year, worked through to create a series of ecstatic, gestural paintings like *Sun Woman 1* (1957) where evocation of the *jouissant* feminine was entirely inseparable from the actions and gestures by which she created the painting. Caught between the gender ideologies in the cultural poles of Hollywood and New York, what could Lee Krasner be, as a painter in the 1950s, when, in the US cultural imagination in that decade, 'the artist' was Jackson Pollock, and 'Woman' was Marilyn Monroe? How did any artist-woman negotiate art and sexual difference in gestural abstract painting?

I first studied abstract painting and sculpture in 1970 because I was appalled at the outrageous gender selectivity of a monumental exhibition selected by the newly-appointed curator of modern art at the Metropolitan Museum New York, Henry Geldzahler, *New York Painting and Sculpture 1940-1970*. In the living presence of a considerable number of major women abstract painters like Lee Krasner, he selected 400 works by 43 artists, of whom only one was an artist-women – Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011). Since 1952, Frankenthaler enjoyed critical notoriety for her technical innovation – uniting support and medium by staining and soaking paint on unprimed canvas or cotton duck, first demonstrated in her Cézannesque gestural landscape painting, *Mountains and Sea* (1952). I began to explore difference by analysing the revelatory photographs of Pollock and Frankenthaler painting.

Not documenting studio practices, such photographs reveal how *method* became *meaning*. The interrelation of gesture, body movement/position and materials combined both to produce visual effects and to engender affects in the viewer, and, as such, exposed painting to the psycho-dynamically-inflected phenomenology of differenced bodies and minds at work with paint both on a real (unstretched canvas)



and in a virtual space (blank otherness). Photographs capture difference being *non-consciously* impressed into abstract art when embodied action made gesture its primary lexicon. Process, material and act thus redefined painting, dissolving both artist/work and figurative/abstract dichotomies. The figurative was absorbed into the mind-body who paints while the resulting 'work' was never expression; it inscribed traces of making and aesthetic decision. Drawing on psychoanalytical, psychodynamic concepts of subjectivity *in process/on trial* evacuates any essentialist assumptions about gender as a fixed given. Pollock's or Frankenthaler's processes generated unforeseen transactions between phenomenological embodiment and the psycho-sexual corporeality and phantasy that we must read formally and psycho-dynamically.

Art making engendered the open event of working with materials in an arena rather than on a surface. The wager for such abstract painting was this: *how or when would the artist decide if she/he had created a painting and not just a chaotic mess of wasted paint?* Painting was thus suspended between *metonymy* (what we see is merely a trace of an artist's action that might become semantically 'dead', abstracted) and *metaphor* (the betrayal of abstraction by facilitating associations between the lines or colours and meanings from beyond the work itself—the world or the artist's consciousness —).

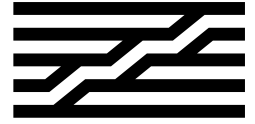
In 1969, Frankenthaler had a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. (Did the Whitney show oblige Geldzahler to include Frankenthaler alone of the many women in New York abstract painting and sculpture in his show?) He selected a painting from her most complex period in the later 1950s: *Other Generations* (1957, National Gallery of Art, Canberra, Australia). On their website, the curators write:

*Other Generations*³ is one of a series of paintings from the autumn of 1957 that can be distinguished from Frankenthaler's dense expressionist landscapes of 1955 and 1956 by their larger scale, open composition and gestural freedom. Vestigial images seem to surface in a number of these later paintings, for example, *Nude and Jacob's Ladder*. In *Other Generations* a female torso appears to materialise in the upper centre of the painting.⁴

When interviewed about her painting by the gallery curators, *who discern a female form*, the artist replied:

Titles are a problem! I often fear that they are used too easily as a "handle"; leading to an emphasis on the literary and/or subjective interpretation in lieu of an aesthetic one ...: in the case of Other Generations I myself would tend to minimize yet recognize your "association with a full female torso". One might project or decipher some kind of figure-shape(s). More important, different carefully-placed, various-sized colorshapes seem to "spawn" or regenerate each other on the canvas surface; colored lines and forms, working in a negative/positive relationship, that create space.⁵

Here we discern the creative exchange between material and gesture while grasping the generative sense of formal relations on the part of the artist at the level of her decision making over the course of making the painting. When (in terms of the making time) and how (in relation to the artist's sense of resolution and



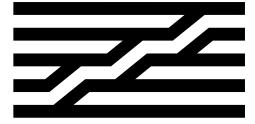
pleasure) could and would the painter have considered her work finished? The artist clearly does not want to forestall the interpretation of residual or emerging figuration that the curators read as a female body. Was the link the curators made an unconscious, or even a conscious, response to the artist being a woman? Is it not legitimate to question all artists about which *phantasmatic body* haunts or shadows the moment of painting, sculpting, dancing or sonic art when, as gestural abstract painting, it ritually renounces the metaphoric in favour of a metonymic relation between body and painting as a possible pathway to sustain *intensity* of affect without ever succumbing to a legible, symbolic form (metaphor)?

Other Generations poses the question of reading through its axis. Frankenthaler worked all around and even on top of a canvas. What decided the final orientation signalled by placement of a signature? A vertical format evokes the upright body. Her title suggests human time, otherness, presences and absences. Why, however do the curators see breasts in a doubled form at the top, and not eyes, for there are several doublings across the events Frankenthaler allowed to occur through dripping, trailing or staining paint. I experimented changing the axis of another Frankenthaler painting, *Nude* (1958), that by title and effect evokes, but never defines, art's female body, to ask myself at what point did a memory of torsion in Rubens' *Hélène Fourment in a Fur Coat* (1636-38) press at the edges of her imagination, not as a source, but as an imaginary partner, not present in, but entering into dialogue with the final 'work' created only *by the decision to designate the vertical axis* for the painting. This allowed the possibility, as a discovered interlocutor with Frankenthaler's defiantly abstract, gestural and process art, of a female persona that could equally evoke an 'art' conversation with the tiny Neolithic Willendorf statuette, the foundational pre-classic female body in art that lay (I suspect) on the horizontal?

What we then 'see' is not figure but an event occurring in the painting process which the artist allowed as part of the intrinsic ambiguity of the work. Her paintings' visual excitement lie in the permanent suspension of anything except the possibility that any play with gesture, material, canvas and body might generate for her and her viewers memories of bodies—painted, imaged, desired, born from, shared, inhabited?

2.

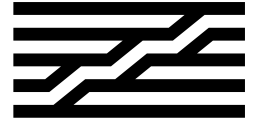
In 2000, I went to the Palais des Beaux in Brussels (Bozar) to see *Borderline*, a twinned exhibition created by the curators Piet Cousens and Paul Vandenbroek. They staged a visual dialogue between two very different bodies of work between which visually and theoretically invited the visitors to experience unexpected but profound resonance in relation to 'the aesthetics of the feminine'.⁶ They presented abstract, free-form woven hangings and carpets created by Berber women across North Africa in still vibrant traditions whose abstract yet symbolic forms echo what is found on the pottery and stonework from Neolithic times. 'The Berber textiles strongly manifest feminine subjectivities (*vues féminines*) which we also discover in contemporary art theory and practice.'⁷ The Berber weavings inscribe an aesthetic created by women, who do not follow symbolic or inherited forms, patterns or iconographies. Each weaving is an



abstract art-event, involving body, time, and psyche. Each is material and abstract, durational and gestural. Weavings build over time, welcoming aesthetic events that occur by chance.

Architect Zaha Hadid (1950-2016) designed the exhibition to enable the viewers, sensorially and bodily, to encounter the collective aesthetic force while recognizing the singular creativity of each artist-woman working free-form weaving. Hadid first immersed us in both haptic and scopic encounter with the textured fields of colour punctuated by chance events. Vast weavings were suspended vertically, closely spaced, the hang creating narrow canyons between which the viewer walked—our bodies intimate with the physical substance and smell of the wool while feeling the visual aesthetic effects of each weave. Aesthetic depth resulted from the sensed trace of the hours of both skilled handwork and open reverie, from the spontaneous eventing that took place in each textile artwork. In a second, darkened hall, weavings were laid horizontally in framed boxes staggered at varying levels, causing the visitor's body to incline towards them, or climb between them to look down on fields of vibrant colour. In a third gallery, woven works were hung individually and vertically, emphasising the singular monumentality of each weaving while creating conversations between different artworks and evoking resonances with the affects, visuality and even marks encountered in the companion show – a retrospective of the contemporary painter Bracha L. Ettinger (b.1948) staged in the long gallery through which the visitor would have to pass to reach the third element of the Berber weaving. This prompted unexpected conversations between two aesthetic practices by women presented under the lens of Ettinger's matrixial aesthetic theory. Ettinger is a post-Holocaust post-painter, working away from her initial mode of gestural paint-drawing in which minimal skull-forms haunted nucleated landscapes turned into white deserts. When Claude Lanzmann announced, with his film *SHOAH* (1985) a taboo on *representation* of the Holocaust, Ettinger abandoned her painting and invented a novel aesthetic practice combining modernist fidelity to materiality and process with post-traumatic, historical obligation to memory and resistance to indexicality. She thus created a post-painting that is as abstract as it was bonded to history.⁸

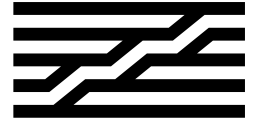
Working from both public and private archives of traumatically-freighted analogue photographs from the catastrophe Lanzmann's *SHOAH* so insistently sought to encounter only through present-time recording of voice and place, Ettinger dissolved the analogue sources into grainy, material residues by passing the archive image through an interrupted photocopy machine. With no lens, the machine blindly translates dark and light into grainy particles then thrown against an electrically-charged copper cylinder to be transferred to paper and heat sealed as replica. Ettinger, however, interrupted the process before sealing. Repeating the process, with different images, each lightly powdered with the unsealed ashen dust, she layered Benjaminian palimpsests of historical time and trauma that the artist then 'painted' over with automatist scanning gestures of a brush loaded with ink.⁹ Later, she pasted the papers onto canvases, and with automatist running brushstrokes of intense colour in oil paint, she layered many passes to sustain a reverie with the traumatic residue, often over many years.¹⁰



Ettinger's paintings are, therefore, abstract. Via rituals of gesture, use of medium, and aesthetically-induced affect, and through the manner of their technological and manual making, the 'paintings' touch historic traces of pain and horror in aesthetic gestures of *compassionate hospitality* and *aesthetic wit(h)nessing*.¹¹ These concepts emerged from the artist's concurrent, psychoanalytical theoretical elaboration of post-Shoah ethical obligations and her post-painting practice through a non-phallic theorization of subjectivity, aesthetics and ethics she terms *matrixial*.¹² In the catalogue, Ettinger theorized *artworking*, extending Freud's psycho-dynamic trio thesis of the psyche as economy in *the work of mourning*, *dreamwork* and *working through*, while also proposing that art can become a potential, never-determinable, *transport station of trauma*.¹³

Vandenbroek's matrixial-feminist exhibition contravened modernist museum canons, juxtaposing textiles with painting, Berber artists with an artist of European-Jewish descent. Both practices were defined as abstract under modern Western art theory and through decolonizing recognition of abstraction in non-European traditions previously dismissed (in the West) as mere geometric pattern making. Both practices are also abstract '*inscriptions in, of and from the feminine*'.¹⁴ No essentialism is evoked here, of course, since the concept of *the feminine* with which Vandenbroek brought Berber women's weaving to the BOZAR came from matrixial aesthetics theorized by Bracha Ettinger. Matrixial aesthetics emerge *with* and *between* art and psychoanalysis through a systematic challenge to the phallogocentric Symbolic, a displacement that also Ettinger created in her crafted imbuing of the sightlessly reprocessed, found and remade mechanical image with the affecting 'pathos formula' created by post-abstract abstract painting, mark, gesture and colour. Paul Vandenbroek's feminist project to suspend art/textile/men/women/Western/Rest of the World hierarchies typical of modernist museum and art histories, enabled him to place different moments and modalities of abstract aesthetic practice by different women in a *strategic encounter* via Hadad's equally feminist exhibition form.

Borderline joined the *Political-Linear* and *Aesthetic-Monumental* temporalities proposed by Julia Kristeva in her essay 'Women's Time'.¹⁵ One pair marks progressivist time of nations, empires, the colony and Western modernism's art historical logic. The other evokes monumental temporalities of bodies and psyches revealed by psychoanalysis and language. *Borderline* displaced structural divisions by which the West poses as the destiny of human history and art. Vandenbroek also challenged the colonial division of world aesthetic practices between Western phallogocentric historical time and others' entrapment in ahistorical timelessness. He allowed sexual difference—the alterity of feminine otherness(es)—to emerge as a resource for contesting those dominant symbolic-political systems by registering, via Ettinger's artwork and matrixial theory, the impact of modern colonialization and genocidal fascism in the 20th century as decisive *events for feminism* and for *any history of modern art*.

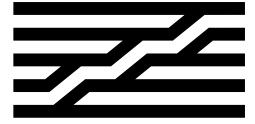


3.

Modernity engenders the sociological, political, cultural framework for any discussion of modern art. In the mid-19th century call for 'painters of modern life', articulated by poet Charles Baudelaire, *modernité* signified as-yet-ungrasped effects of industrial capitalist social-economic processes whose subjective experiences might be discernible *if only artists could create aesthetic means to recognize the signs of, and aesthetically register, both modernity's effects and its affects.*

Women participated in the aesthetic project to give form to a cultural modernity. The egalitarian Impressionist exhibiting society (1874-1886) was the first to demonstrate what became the defining feature: the *co-creation of modernity and modern art by women and men of all genders and sexualities and ethnicities.* Such co-creation, however has been systematically written out of race-gender-exclusive bourgeois modernist art history. While apparently embracing the modern, modern art museums have systematically enacted an exclusion of women as artists, *even as their evident presence was a key signifier of modernity.* So why has mono-gendered, racially exclusive and predominantly heterocratic canon been tolerated for so long that we, women and feminists, have had to challenge it but without much success *for over half a century* and even wait until the *first decades of the 21st century* to make even minor inroads in mainstream museum exhibitions that still stand out as rare exceptions. Thus, when we now mount exhibitions to *re-present* the artist-women museums failed to collect or promote in their own moment of creative practice, we find that, despite our intention make them visible, they are inevitably framed as *late-comers* to the main story, or newly *discovered*, or rare *forgotten* exceptions. These terms automatically *other* them. They are collectively placed in a crude category: *women* even as our intention is to make each one known as what I termed in my essay for the catalogue '*the singular, historic and always-present co-creators of the diverse modalities of modern aesthetic practices.*'

The other side of the coin of modernist absenting is a history of the persistent and diverse creativity of women, inspired and enabled by modernity itself to contest the 19th century triangulation of forces identified by Julia Kristeva as the alignment of Family, capitalist State and Christian religious discourse.¹⁶ The avant-garde emerged as the aesthetic-ideological contestant of the Church-State-Family trio that incited consciousness of gender and sexuality in women and queer subjects who registered both dissent from the bourgeois concept of *Woman and gender* and enacted resistance to the limited social being the bourgeois order offered to women. Remembering Bridget Riley's comment, gender-neutral, universalist philosophies then attracted women modernists who sought to escape from the *over-feminization* inflicted by the bourgeois order. Yet, behind the apparently neutral, *under-feminization* of modern art (art has no sex), women were offered no space at all for the recognition of specificity or difference that the radical inventiveness of modernist art forms, specifically abstraction, made it possible to explore aesthetically. Modernism enacted an inquiry into fundamental questions of materiality, the phenomenology of embodiment, the aesthetic processes of formulation and of form itself, the psycho-sexual conditions of



different desires, the drama of what many termed the spirit – the beyond of the materialist capitalist world, be that cosmic, spiritual or psychological. Yet any sign of what was rightly or idiotically defined as *feminine* was used to disqualify women from their place in that modernist venture, without, however, stopping ever them.

The 'avant-garde' challenge in which women co-participated from the start – to the patriarchal bourgeois social and symbolic order – was almost immediately betrayed by modern musealization, formalist rationalization and effacement of insights into complexity and difference at the level of semiosis, psyche and social as well as phenomenological embodiment that modernist, notably abstract, aesthetic practices generated precisely because of the co-creation of abstract art. Now, we might finally learn ourselves through what these art practices by diverse women impressed into our culture *in, of and from the many feminine(s)* that these artists uncovered or refuted in themselves, artists whose insights have been systematically repressed by denying the richness and significance of difference.

Notes

1. Riley, Bridget, 1973. 'The Hermaphrodite' in Linda Nochlin, *Art & Sexual Politics: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (New York: MacMillan & Collier Books).
2. Griselda Pollock. 2022. *Killing Men & Dying Women: Imagining Difference in 1950s New York Painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
3. See : <https://searchthecollection.nga.gov.au/object/43903> (Accessed 24 November 2022)"
4. <https://searchthecollection.nga.gov.au/object?uniqueId=43903>
5. Helen Frankenthaler, correspondence with the National Gallery, Canberra, Australia, 29 November 1988, Canberra, Archives of the National Gallery of Art.
6. Cousens, Piet & Vandenbroek, Paul. 2000. *Borderline*. Brussels: Bozar - Palais des Beaux Arts.
7. Vandenbroek, Paul. 2000. Azetta: *L'art des femmes berbères* (Gent: Ludion & Brussels: Bozar - Palais des Beaux Arts), 5.
8. Lyotard, Jean-François 1995. 'Diffracted Traces', *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Halala-Autistwork* (Aix-en-Provence: Cité du Livre), 5-31.
9. Buci-Glucksman, Christine (1995) 'The Inner Space of Painting', *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Halala-Autistwork* (Aix-en-Provence: Cité du Livre), 58-68.
10. Griselda Pollock, 2000. 'Nichtsapha: Yearning/Languishing and the Immaterial Touch of Colour in Painting after Painting after History', in Piet Cousens & Paul Vandenbroek (eds), *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Artworking 1985-1999* (Brussels: Palais des Beaux Arts) 45-70.
11. Griselda Pollock, 2013. *Art in the Time-Space of Memory and Migration: Bracha L. Ettinger in the Freud Museum* (Leeds and London: Freud Museum and the Wild Pansy Press).
12. Ettinger, Bracha L. 2020. *Matrixial Subjectivity, Aesthetics and Ethics: Selected Writings Vol 1 1990-1999*. Edited by Griselda Pollock (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan).
13. Griselda Pollock, "Art as the transport-station of trauma", in P. Cousens and P. Vandenbroeck, *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Artworking 1985-1999* (Brussels: Palais des Beaux Arts) 91-116.
14. Pollock, Griselda. 1996. 'Inscriptions in the Feminine', in Catherine de Zegher, *Inside the Visible: elliptical traverse of twentieth century art, in, of and from the feminine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 67-88.
15. Julia Kristeva. 1979. 'Le temps des femmes', *Cahiers de recherche de Sciences des textes et des documents*, 5, 5-19; 'Women 's Time' trans Alice Jardine and Henry Blake in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 187-213.
16. Kristeva, Julia 1974. *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil; Revolution in Poetic Language, trans Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984)