

FEMINIST LOOKS

Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies

edited by Diane Neumaier
 foreword by Anne Wilkes Tucker
 Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995
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In her effort to bring the feminist photographer and critic together in one inclusive volume, *Reframings's* editor, Diane Neumaier, discovered that feminist critics seem more interested in analyzing dominant culture than feminist artwork. Neumaier states in her introduction: "Simply put, most feminist image-makers cannot get an audience with feminist critics." *Reframings* bridges this gap between the theorist and artist by including essays that thoughtfully address new feminist photography, thereby diminishing the usual distance between the artist and critic to the advantage of both. *Reframings* promotes a community of feminists whose common concerns attest to Neumaier's assertion that, now, "art and criticism are not only mutually generative but are often dependent." Providing visibility to feminist photographers and theorists, and emphasizing the interrelation of the two, *Reframings* expands the parameters of feminist discourse, while at the same time collecting a canon to which scholars might refer in the future. In this manner *Reframings* responds to Linda Nochlin's famous 1973 query "why have there been no great women artists?" with the assurance that now there are great women artists and critics.

Reframings is divided into eight topics, each with a critical essay and several featured photographers. The eight headings—"Gendering Space," "Domestic Production/Reproduction/Resistance," "Identity Formations," "Postcolonial Legacies," "Rationalizing and Realizing the Body," "Sex and Anxiety," "Crossing Over: Reimagining and Reimaging" and "Representing Representation"—apply multicultural concerns to a wide range of artistic material. This structure mirrors the historical changes that have occurred within feminist art practice over the past 30-odd years, from a politically-oriented movement to a discipline institutionalized within the academic field of cultural studies. *Reframings* reflects this historical shift by including over 100 pages of critical analysis by such prominent writers as Lucy Lippard, Deborah Willis, Theresa Harlan, Julia Ballerini, Moira Roth, Catherine Lord, Valerie Soe and Abigail Solomon-Godeau.

The art in *Reframings* exemplifies feminist photography's growing alliance with critical theories that interrogate the cultural context of representation. In addition to such conceptual innovators as Mary Kelly, Martha Rosler, Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger, *Reframings* also features less known photographers whose work relies upon psychoanalytic and historical models, building upon and expanding feminism's theoretical strengths. For instance, photographs from Carla Williams's 1991 series "How to Read Character" bring the photographic depiction of her body into the territory of phrenology, eugenics and other nineteenth-century systems of body mapping. Overlapping small photographs of various exposures to build the image of her body, Williams then encloses the full image within a gilt frame. Below each photograph she includes an illustration of a nineteenth-century text referencing racial and biological differentiation, addressing, in her own

words, "the historical precedence of a particular kind of visual representation." Diane Neumaier's 1988 series of closely cropped color photographs of paintings from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, aptly titled "Metropolitan Tits," brings the viewer's attention to the manner in which the female body is depicted within the context of fine art. Susan Jahoda's photographs from her 1989 "Theatres of Madness" series combine text with images from the New York Psychiatric Institute in order to explore psychiatric assumptions that link femininity and hysteria. Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie's *Census Makes a Native Artist* (1992) ironically parodies the mug shot as self-portrait. The numerical code superimposed across her face alludes to the recently passed law that requires artists to register themselves as "native" to show or sell in federally funded Native American spaces. These photographers exemplify a growing body of work that contextualizes a historical discourse in order to explore the cultural and political implications of representations of the female body.

Starting from the premise that gender is essential to an analysis of the politics of representation, *Reframings* also participates in feminism's movement into ethnicity, class, age and sexuality. Within multiculturalist discourses, politics is defined by the assertion of identity categories. Unfortunately these categories narrow the scope of women's experiences (a primary component of the '70s feminist consciousness-raising efforts) to identity classifications. Although "experience" is now considered a dangerously essentialist concept, its exclusion from the discourse eclipses feminism's initial insight that "the personal is political" under the shadow of a theoretically circumscribed notion of identity. This territorialization of identity constrains the vitality of the political-feminist project by encouraging rather than challenging boundaries.

The cohabitation of race, gender, class, age and sexual orientation within multiculturalism implies a universal "family of women." The term "family" suggests a leveling of diverse and distinct women, insinuating an alliance where there may be none.¹ In "This Is Not a Fairy Tale: A Middle-aged Female Pervert (White) in the Era of Multiculturalism," Lord explores the conflicts within this multicultural environment. Sharing her conversation with a fellow academic, an "artist, a woman of color," Lord exposes the differing goals that she, an academic queer theorist, and her supposed ally, a woman artist of color, harbor behind the veneer of complementarity. In the course of her story Lord discloses the anxious waters that lap at the shores of the multicultural archipelago. This is a site where "[we] are, counterproductively and predictably, two pawns bickering on the margins. Inasmuch as power accrues to the center, and neither of us two middle-aged women will ever, ever, ever in our lives get there, we jockey for proximity, two more bitches in a catfight."

As identities rigidify into boundaries and territories, those who fall between categories are virtually undetectable, unaccounted for, invisible to the feminist eye. For instance, Neumaier shares with us her discovery that in the "process of assembling *Reframings* [there] was a void: in my exploration of contemporary feminist photographic works, I didn't find direct, enthusiastic expressions of feminine heterosexual desire or pleasure." She attributes this absence to the fact that "straight women still must negotiate difficult power relations with men." Yet this dearth of material is not

due to a lack of production, but rather to a lack of "feminist" defined photography.² The contradictory relationship between categories—in this instance, feminist and desirous heterosexual



Grandma Renee holding Ana (17 months) at the edge of the pool one of the strict rules of the adult community where my parents live is that only children who are toilet trained may enter the pool. She constantly asks if Ana is trained yet, while reminding me that I was trained at 18 months.

From "between the birthdays" (1981-) by Linda Brooks. From *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies* (1995) by Diane Neumaier.

woman—creates a schism such that the two categories exclude one another. Thus artistic expressions of heterosexual desire are often banished from the realm of "feminist art." In her 1992 essay "Visual Pleasure: A Feminist Perspective," Johanna Drucker attributes this lacunae to the rigidity of psychoanalytic models (Lacan for instance) in which "women cannot have pleasure, cannot be in pleasure, cannot be subjects (to begin with), and certainly not subjects of pleasure."³ According to Drucker, theories of the construction of femininity constrain the artistic exploration of female pleasure. The boundaries of such models guarantee that female pleasure will remain not only undetectable but impossible to visualize. Feminism's theoretical model constrains the artistic exploration of pleasure as well. The notion of an undivided (though plural) community of women within, and a dangerous and fractured male world without, inhibits the possibility of thinking pleasure feministically.

Nan Goldin's photographs from her ongoing series "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency" (1978-) constitute an exception to this void. Goldin is able to straddle the opposition between feminist/pleasure by narrating this series with her own autobiographical voice. Goldin leads us into New York City's underworld with voyeuristic delight, depicting the glamour and the pain of desire, addiction and sexuality. In the six photographs reproduced in *Reframings*, Goldin pictures the irreconcilable lure of heterosexual coupling. Capitalizing on the snapshot aesthetic, she expands the visual vocabulary of erotic attachment by capturing the lurid color range of indoor lighting, unsightly flash shadows and awkward compositional moments on glossy cibachrome prints. Goldin's photographs from "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency" bring to mind the tradition of Brassai's 1933 "Paris de Nuit" series, serving as an example of a feminist art practice that advantageously plunders photography's rich history. Although Goldin distinguishes herself from other recent documentary photographers by her active engagement with her subjects, she is clearly within the photographic tradition of eroticizing the other, be it colonized subjects, street kids, prostitutes, punks or addicts. Her narration strengthens the allure by creating a seeming proximity between the viewer, the photographer and the subject.

Tackling the issue of pleasure in a fresh and direct manner, contemporary lesbian photographers such as Phyllis Christopher, Della Grace, Tessa Boffine and Jill Poesner, none of whom are featured in *Reframings*, exhibit an increasing facility with the depiction of their sexuality. Neumaier states that "[l]esbian explorations of sexual pleasure made great leaps in the

past decade and have much to offer." It is the gap between feminism and lesbianism that first created a new freedom for lesbian photographers. In Gayle Rubin's 1984 essay, "Thinking Sex," she decoupled the lesbian/feminist alliance, re-aligning

lesbians with other marginalized sex groups (such as s/m, homosexuals . . .) rather than with heterosexual feminists.⁴ By challenging the notion of a single community of women, lesbians were finally able to address the difficult issue of sexuality within and amongst women. This parting of the ways reflects the freedom that some contemporary lesbian photographers possess when exploring the complex issues that surround sexual pleasure, such as objectification, masochism, sadism and voyeurism.

In Catherine Opie's 1991 *Self-Portrait* the subject/photographer stands against a lush green backdrop facing away from the camera. On her back is carved a childlike scene of a house, a cloud and two figures holding hands. Yet, departing from the norm, the two figures are both depicted with the recognizable skirt of the girl-symbol. This scene is freshly carved—the wounds are raw and swollen. What kind of self is depicted in this backward confession of lesbian desire? Is this self-portraiture, self-mutilation or an aggressive refusal to face us? Through this subtle reconfiguration of the conventional portrait, Opie explores the relationship between sexual and photographic convention in the construction of identity. Her inversion of the conventional portrait is an acknowledgment of the undetectable lesbian self, the self that is excluded from representation. In this way, Opie and other photographers who explore the exclusions created by the categories of identification reanimate the feminist discourse.

In her essay "Rationalizing and Realizing," Roth puts forth the question: "Is it possible that a new generation of women artists may increasingly use the camera to address the question of women's bodies in ways that will help disentangle false oppositions of theory and experience, of construction and deconstruction?" With its emphasis on the "re" of *Reframings*, this book indicates that feminism is now challenging these oppositions, thereby repositioning the contours of the discourse for the coming millennium. The ensuing contradictions and exclusions produce exciting, if volatile, results. Are we ready for a new politics of visibility? *Reframings* anticipates an artistic practice in which the cultural perimeter ceases to be theorized as a plurality of marginalized subjects, but, rather, as a complex web of personal experience and social/historical determination. The acceptance of hybrid identities suggests a practice where race and sexual orientation are explored for the complications they produce, a site where voyeurism, pleasure and feminist analysis do not compete one against the other, but instead work toward a new definition of feminism itself. □

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NOTES

- As a photographic example of the universalizing presumption that "family" implies, Edward Steichen's 1955 "Family of Man" exhibition celebrated "the essential oneness of mankind thought the world," and has been roundly criticized for recontextualizing disparate photographs into its overarching humanistic theme.
- For example, think of the erotically adventurous photographic work by Barbara DeGenevieve, Annie Sprinkle and Laura Letinsky.
- Johanna Drucker, "Visual Pleasure: A Feminist Perspective," *M/E/A/N/I/N/G/S* 11 (May 1992), pp. 3-11.
- Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex" was first published in 1984 in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, (Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1984) and reprinted in Henry Abelove et al. eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 3-44.