Material Girls: Feminism and Body Matters

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I. Identity and the Body

Desdemona: *Am I that name, Iago?*
Iago: *What name, fair lady?*
Desdemona: *Such as she says my lord did say I was.*
William Shakespeare, *Othello*, IV. ii

As this quote seems to illustrate, the questioning of identity, which is implicit in the act of naming and in representation (self-representation and alter-), has always been a key issue in literature and, we might add, in the arts, as the whole. My aim in this paper is to reflect on the form this very questioning has assumed today, specifically when we concentrate on the poetics of representation of the female body, by simultaneously paying attention to modes of inscription of identity on the female body, and the construction and deconstruction of subjectivity at stake there.

My title, "Material Girls" bears, I hope, a recognisable resemblance to Madonna's hit song, *Material Girl*, from the 1980s. A controversial icon of femininity and a provocative challenge to Feminism, Madonna – herself a "material girl" – became an emblematic figure of cultural theory: a contradictory image of woman's empowerment, a camp sex symbol, often playing with the androgynous, a commodity *fetish*, etc., etc., yet strikingly able to resist facile categorisations. As Suzanna Walters writes, "the ambiguity of Madonna's self-presentation (Is she putting us on? Is she mocking the male gaze or wilfully

giving in to it? Is she whore or madonna, or both, or neither?) points to the already overdetermined status of representing woman in popular culture" (Walters, 1995: 2).

Despite this reference in my title, popular culture is not going to be my focus here, but it establishes, I believe, an important link to the theme of women and representation, my subject today.

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We all tend to agree that it is difficult to discuss the woman's body as a concept without essentializing it or reducing it to an abstraction, and, consequently, dematerializing it. This is a risky route that may lead to a dead end: the search for a "pure", self-representing femininity. On the other hand, at exactly the opposite pole of this concern, is the traditional understanding of the female body as an "opaque concept", which, likewise the concept of "woman" is always defined "in relation to", or in some juxtaposition with "human" and even more so, to "men", as Denise Riley argues (Riley, 1988: 107).

It has been a major concern of Feminism, since at least the 60s, to "re-conceptualize the female body", so as to bring it into a variety of discussions and struggles, from abortion to contraception, maternity, body image, sexuality pornography, etc. (Grosz, 1995: 31); moreover, Feminism, since its very early days and campaigns has placed a strong emphasis in the need to bring "the feminine body into writing" (needless to say, we are here reminded of Woolf's essays, her public lectures, her novels, from *A Rooom of One's Own* to *Orlando* and *Three Guineas*; we should also recall the subversive texts of the French feminists from the 70's (namely, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva), who have strongly argued that the woman's body is a site of difference, of struggle and resistance.[1]

Contemporary Feminism is still at odds over this issue, which, as Judith Butler reminds us, has somehow shifted from

"writing the body" to "inscribing the materiality of the female body". A new difficulty has thus been added to this process, as Butler adds in an ironical remark: "It may be only a question of learning how to read those troubled translations" (Butler, 1993: ix). The need to rethink the politics of representation, following the awareness of this materiality or *corporeality* of the feminine has thus come to mean the "redesigning of the boundaries of the female body" and implicitly discovering new cartographies of the feminine (as we shall see allegorized in some of the pictures I will show, as for example in Jenny Saville's painting, "Plan" (1993)). Feminist critics and theorists have emphasised the fact that these should be seen in the context of a "politics of location", such as Adrienne Rich put forward in a pioneering text, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location", where she addresses a polemical apostrophe to a famous sentence by Virginia Woolf:

> As a woman I have a country; as a woman I cannot divest myself of that country merely by condemning its government or by saying three times *'As a woman my country is the whole world'*. (...) Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in – the body. (Rich, 1987: 212)

Susan Stanford Friedman in a recent book (*Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, 1998), has also underlined this issue, arguing for the need for women engaged in a feminist practice to construct a "geopolitics of identity", where the concept of difference, not in a reified or fetishised form, but embracing contradiction, dislocation and change, is crucial. Addressing the same issue, feminist practice as a "politics of location", Rosi Braidotti has also pointed out the need for "a collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spacio-temporal territory" (Braidotti, 2000: 2-3) which, in its turn, has a positive consequence, since, as she claims, "it 'de-territorializes us', i.e., it estranges us from the familiar, the

intimate, the known and casts an external light upon it" (*Ibidem*). Seen from this perspective, the body becomes "an inter-face, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces (...) a cultural construction" (*Ibidem*), ceasing to be a fiction or an immaterial entity, but instead a true "place of location" which need not be transcended but rather "reclaimed", says Rich (1987: 213- 4).

Hence, the reconceptualization of the body at stake in the visual arts has become inseparable from the redefinition of identity and it has become a crucial field of inquiry for feminist artists engaged in the process of *re-vision* or *re-presentation* of the female body, as I hope to show in the course of this essay.

Before we proceed, it is important to examine the claims raised in this context by Elizabeth Grosz (1995). She calls our attention to the dangers of an excessive "discursivization" or "theorization" of the body, which, she argues, can easily turn into a new process of "neutralization" or "sanitization" of the whole issue. And Grosz emphasizes, much along the same line of thought as Judith Butler, the need for Feminism to come to terms with the materiality of the female body: "there is still a strong reluctance to conceptualize the female body as playing a major part in women's oppression (...) Analyses of the representation of bodies abound, but bodies in their *material variety* still wait to be thought" (Grosz, 1995: 31).

The images we are going to see, by contemporary women artists, photographers and painters (Jo Spence, Jenny Saville and Paula Rego), daringly take issue with the representation of the woman's body, proposing a reappraisal of its "natural boundaries", and enacting in the process, a transgressive re-conceptualization of femininity. Their remapping of the woman's body in the social includes a dual process of simultaneously constructing and deconstructing preconceived gender categories, models and stereotypes, while challenging notions of woman as an object of representation, as well as woman as viewer of herself represented.

My analysis will mainly focus on two (by no means antagonistic) poles of this strategy of representation, which are also crucial to the definition of woman's identity, i.e., the tension between the *sublime and the abject; the personal and the political.*

II. The Poetics of Desire and Postmodern Irony

> Women thus function as the body for men – correlative with the effacement of the sexual concreteness of their (womanly) bodies. If women are represented as the bodily counterparts to men's conceptual supremacy, women's bodies, pleasures and desires are reduced to versions or variants of men's bodies and desires. Women are thus represented as castrated, lacking and incomplete, as if these were inherently qualities (or absences) of their (natural) bodies rather than a function of men's self-representations. (Grosz, 1995: 38)

I would like us to consider this quote while looking back at some famous images of women nudes within the so-called "Great Master Tradition": e.g., Titian, "Venus of Urbino" (1538); Cabanel, "The Birth of Venus" (1863); Ingres, "La Grande Odalisque" (1814); Manet, "Olympia" (1863); Manet, "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe" (1863); Gauguin, "Tahitian Girl" (1903); Man Ray, "Demain" (1924) and "Figure" (1930); Magritte's "La Répresentation" (1937). And, as a mode of dissonance, two images by a surrealist woman artist, Meret Oppenheim, "Ma Gouvernante" (1936) and "La Presse"(1933).

The concern of contemporary women artists, in their turn, has been primarily the problematizing of this tradition of representation, proposing as an alternative mode, the representation "from within", which transforms women's role in art from objects of representation into "viewers of themselves represented" capable of "returning the gaze" of the male viewer. This transgressive process, as feminist art

historians have been pointing out, is part of the female counter-culture that grew particularly under the impact of the woman's emancipation movement of the 70s.[2] The images we are going to see inscribe themselves within this counter-culture. The privileged subject represented is the female body, often through the medium of the self-portrait; however, a major transformation takes place in this feminine appropriation of one of the main subject themes of the "Great pictorial tradition": the bodies represented are redefined, their social functions are contested and reevaluated; from passively seductive bodies, they become "sites of struggle and resistance".[3] Quoting again Elizabeth Grosz:

> Bodies speak, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become intertextuated, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become incarnated. If bodies are traversed and infiltrated by knowledges, meanings, and power, they can also, under certain circumstances, become sites of struggle and resistance, actively inscribing themselves on social practices. (Grosz, 1995: 35-6)

I believe it is essential to contextualize our observation of these images within the theoretical framework of Postmodernism, so that we can inquire into the ways Feminism has appropriated or subverted postmodern strategies or indeed added a new, more radical and political perspective to the postmodern questioning of art, through its particular usage of the tropes of irony and parody. Thus, paraphrasing Craig Owens, one might ask whether something truly new has come from the "feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation".[4]

Essentially, my purpose is to explore the "double wedge" of Postmodernism, or its "paradoxical essence", as Linda Hutcheon writes (Hutcheon, 1988b: 300), based on the intrinsic tension that grows from its simultaneous relation of

complicity with and criticism of History. And, furthermore, to consider Postmodernism's oblique relation with Feminism and vice-versa, i.e., the nature and the quality of the feminist intervention in art, and how that has been affecting the redefinition of the concept of the postmodern itself. Thus, understanding Feminism both as a political instance (an action or intervention) and a critique of representation, could one say, quoting Susan Suleiman, that "if there existed a genuinely feminist postmodernist practice, then postmodernism could no longer be seen as the expression of a fragmented, exhausted culture steeped in nostalgia for a lost centre" (Suleiman, 1990: 188-9).

Cindy Sherman

I will now briefly refer to the work of Cindy Sherman, who has become a crucial reference in this field (self-portrait photography) and who happens to have had recently a major retrospective of her work in Portugal. Sherman belongs to a group of North-American women artists who have been working since the late 70s and 80s (together with Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, among others), whose work can aptly be described through the concepts of *action* and *intervention* in the city, the street, the social space. They actively refuse the enclosing walls of the Museum, reject auratic art and the strict boundaries of each art, as well as the artificial divisions between the word and the image; instead, their purpose is to address the public and the viewer directly, provoking, stating that the personal is political, challenging consumer society, its values and its ways of enforcing authority and power.

Sherman is particularly interesting to us given her consistent work in the questioning of gender as an *unfixed category*. Her work is essentially theatrical, addressing the

deconstruction of gender stereotypes through a sophisticated technique of mise en abyme, a performative parody of the icons and myths of the feminine and femininity itself. It explores the concept of representation and, as a consequence, the making of identity, through the viewers' eyes: the world of fashion magazines, the mass media, the classic Hollywood movie of the 50s and 60s. It plays ironically with the concepts of the masque and travestissement, creating unsettling visions where the viewer is always confronted with the image viewed and, at the same time, herself/himself viewing the image. Sherman's work draws largely on psychoanalysis and has often been read in this specific context translating, as Elisabeth Bronfen claims, the "hysteric language of the body", i.e., representing the eternal disjunctions of the hysterical in relation to her identity: "Do I exist or am I the mere repetition of an image?", "Am I masculine or feminine?", "Am I human or animal?" (Bronfen, 1996: 50-51).[5] Sherman's phantasmagoria, as Bronfen claims, oscillates between the representation of the process of sublimation and de-sublimation of woman as *fetish*, as well as the representation of narcissistic phantasies and cultural codes. Thus, while representing woman in "clivage", as "a knotted subject", she desconstructs "the Western iconographic tradition which identifies Woman with Image" (Bronfen, 1996: 53).

Despite Sherman's disclaimer that her work is not theoretical or conceptual, as Laura Mulvey reminds us, it would have been impossible without a whole pre-history of Feminism and its theorization of the body and representation, within the framework of Semiotics and Psychoanalysis. Her representations are, according to Mulvey, "re-representations", a "making strange", where she "dissects the phantasmagoric space conjured up by the female body, from its exteriority to its interiority" (Mulvey, 1991: 138-9).

Jenny Saville

The work of the painter **Jenny Saville** (following a similar trend to Sherman's work on the portrait and the self-portrait), is clearly part of the feminist "revision" project in the context of the visual arts, the "redrawing the lines" and "natural borders" of the body, thus problematizing the normative categories that traditionally define the female body and map it in society. As Lynda Nead has argued, this project has come to mean, on the one hand, "opening up visual culture to different kinds of images of femininity and the female body" and, on the other hand, it "has politicized the role of visibility itself" (Nead, 1992: 79). The artist Jenny Saville when asked about her personal and ideological commitment to this *remapping* practice, claimed:

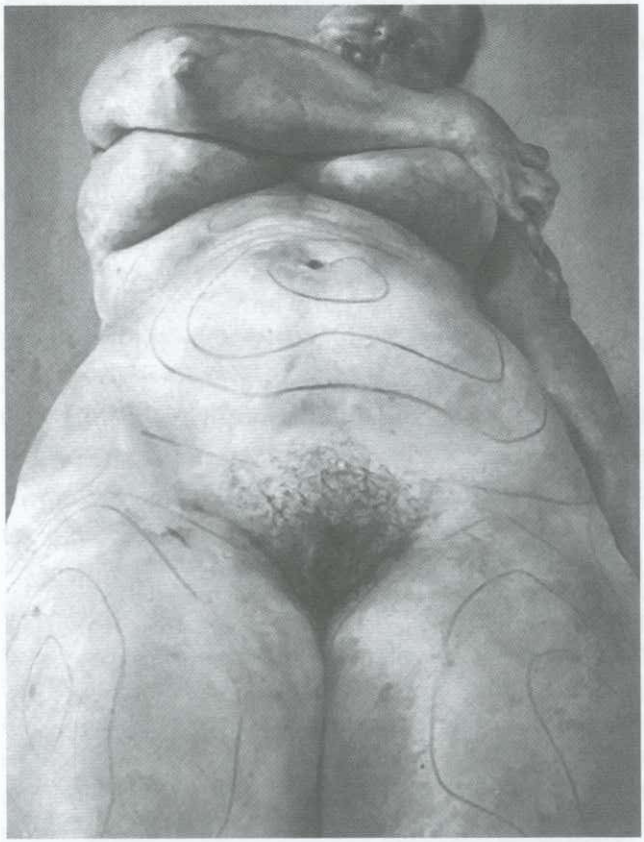
> I would not catalogue myself as a feminist artist but a person incredibly informed by feminism's theories. I enjoy working with the female body - making an institution of 'the Nude' - a territory traditionally occupied by male artists and female models: the assessor and the assessed. A unifying interest for many artists since the 1960s has been a reworking of representations of the body and this work has evolved in tandem with feminism's discussion on representation generally. (*apud* Roberts, 1997: 86)

Moreover, when questioned about her particular representations of the female body and the kind of discomfort it normally caused on the viewer, she replied:

> I wanted to make images of bodies which directly returned the gaze of the viewer in a confrontational way. To make them aware of their position as 'assessor' by playing off the security afforded by the illusion of a familiar genre of Western nude painting against the physical nature of the paint and scale; the frontal directness of the body and its extended boundaries intended to disrupt expectations of how a 'female nude' should behave. (*Ibidem*)

Untitled, Jenny Saville (1994)

Plan, Jenny Saville (1993)



Jo Spence

Similarly, in her challenging photographic work, **Jo Spence** explores feminine physical identity aiming at distinct targets, some more overtly conceptual, calling our attention to issues of identity and difference; others of a more pragmatic nature, crudely exposing the body and reclaiming our control over it, by focussing directly on controversial issues, such as illness and the use of therapeutics. See for example the image "Exiled" (Undated), from the series *Narratives of Dis-ease*, where
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Jo Spence, in a disturbing series of self-portraits daringly represents one of the most feared taboos: the sick, defaced and mutilated body: it is an image of the artist herself after receiving surgical treatment for breast cancer. The explicit transgression consists in the obvious aesthetic inversion of the traditionally seductive image of the female body by the public exhibition of a body made abject by sickness and deformity, which the word "Monster", inscribed on the breast, identifies as a scream of horror and protest. The face is partially hidden by a mask, like in the "Phantasm of the Opera", symbolizing the experience of disfiguration and consequently of exclusion; the exposed body, offered up for commiseration and violation by the public gaze still renders an evocation of a feminine image of Christ.

As Lynda Nead writes:

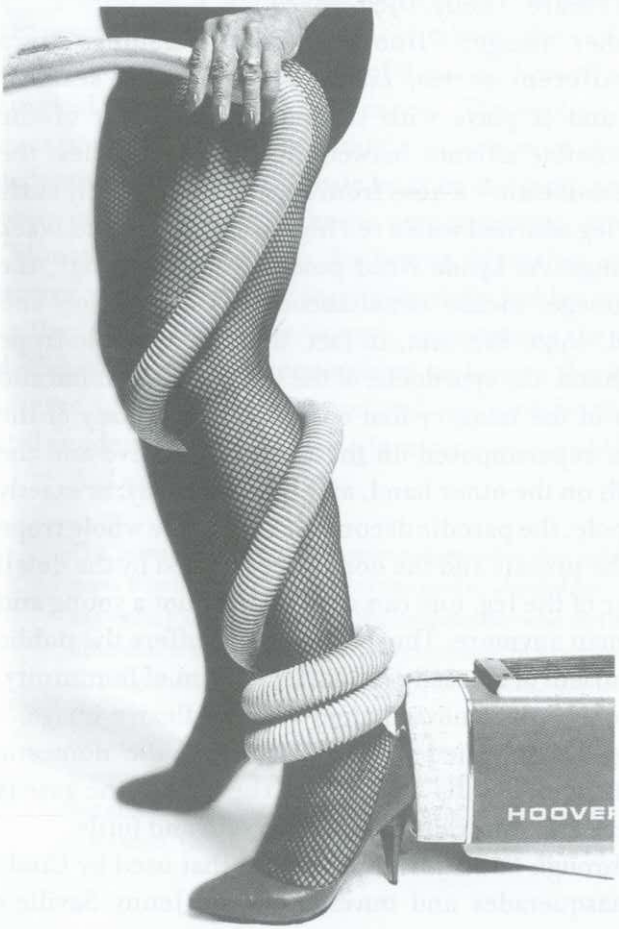
> The female body is constantly subjected to the judgemental gaze. Whether it be the gaze of the medic who defines the body as healthy or diseased, or the *connoisseur* who defines it as beautiful or ugly, the female body is caught in a perpetual cycle of judgement and categorization. (...) Shock, identification, rejection, admiration, sympathy – all these are possible responses to the images. But ultimately, the power of the images lies in the fact that we are not made to witness a display but are, rather, involved in the process through which identity is formed. (Nead, 1992: 81)

Jo Spence has been involved in the development of a trend that has been called "photo-therapy", which co-opts psychoanalysis together with a socialist feminist approach to everyday life. Despite the obvious theoretical resonance of her work as "abject" and "monstrous" after Kristeva (1982), in fact, as Jane Kelly rightly claims, the association of her visual practice with theory should be understood as a powerful disclaimer for "solidarity and the *possibility, the necessity of change*": "Not images illustrating theory, nor theory informing practice, but theory and practice combined as praxis, with the issue of function at its centre" (Kelly, 1997: 28-9).

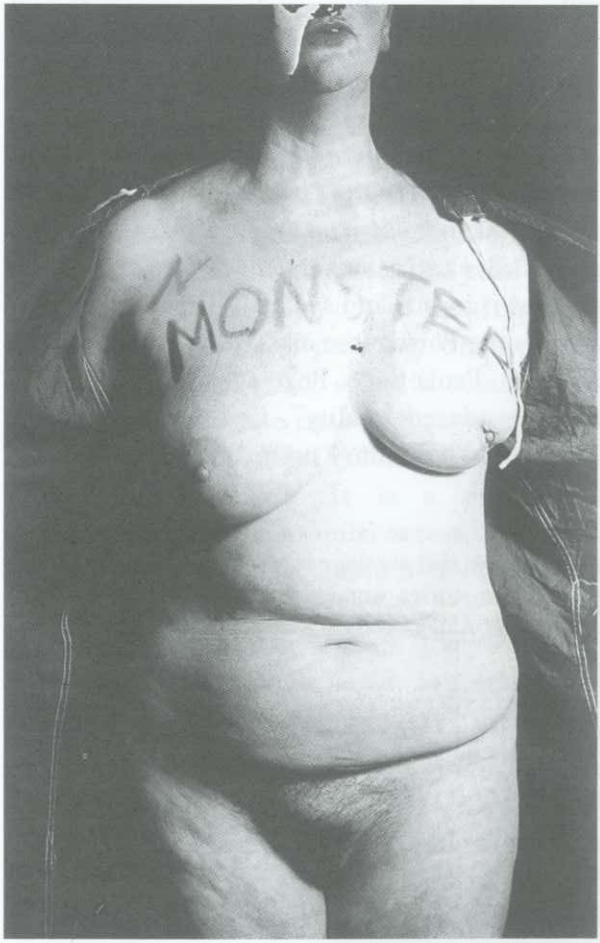
The other image, "Hoover" (1989), belongs to a completely different series, *Libido Uprising*; it is sexually provocative, and it plays with the parodic element of the allegedly impossible alliance between two opposite poles: the erotic and the domestic – a hose from a hoover seductively curls up a woman's leg adorned with a red high stiletto shoe and black fishnet stockings. As Lynda Nead points out, "Uprising", the title of this image, means simultaneously "insurrection and ascent" (Nead, 1992: 81), and, in fact, there is a double trope here. On one hand, the synedoche of the leg, as a sex symbol and as a fragment of the imagery that composes the fantasy of the femme-fatale, superimposed on the figuration of Eve and the serpent of evil; on the other hand, and, one could say, at exactly the opposite pole, the parodic deconstruction of the whole trope – a vision of the prosaic and the domestic, excelled by the detail that the owner of the leg, one can easily tell, is not a young and seductive woman anymore. Thus, if the image offers the public the pure voyeurism of an easily recognizable icon of femininity, the "feminine leg", it is nevertheless a self-reflexive image, a *simulacrum*, perversely tied to the banality of the domestic chores that, allegedly, "kills" the erotic. The voyeuristic gaze is thus frustrated, and ironically parodied as vain and futile.

Thus, through an identical process to that used by Cindy Sherman's masquerades and *travestissements*, Jenny Saville's

Hoover, from *Libido Uprising*, Jo Spence (1989)



Exiled, from *Narratives of Dis-ease*, Jo Spence (Undated)



unusual scale of painting, Jo Spence's work exhibits the disruptive category that characterizes the nature of feminist intervention in art, exposing how the construction and deconstruction of multiple patterns of identity is articulated with multiple representations and refigurations of the female body.

III. Body Matters and Women's Empowerment

Paula Rego

In this last section I want to give two examples of how *"body matters"* in contemporary women's art and how corporeality is an essential element of women's social and political *empowerment*, bearing a mark of that "female unruliness" that, as anthropologist Victor Turner wrote, "threatens any social order and seems the more threatening, the more that order seems rigorous and secure" (Turner, 1977: 41-2). Both images are by the Portuguese artist long since resident in the United Kingdom, Paula Rego. Rego's work is recognised for its notoriously "gendered quality", i.e., for bearing the inscription of a female commentary upon the male tradition, which she openly accepts:

> My pictures are pictures that are done by a woman artist. The stories I tell are the stories women tell. If art becomes genderless, what is it? A neuter? That's no good, is it? (*apud* Roberts, 1997: 85)

Her art comes from "being a woman", and having a "woman's experience", but is also informed by the study of Art History and the Great Masters tradition, which she transgressively appropriates (or "poaches" as she says). Furthermore, as I want to argue, Rego's work is deeply imbued in the postmodern usage of irony and re-vision.[6]

The first image I want to focus on is the "First Mass in Brazil", a painting from 1993. It is a striking representation of woman as a colonised body, offering a palimpsestic revision of Portuguese colonial History powerfully allegorised in the image of the pregnant (raped?) woman's body, itself a metonymy for the pregnant/raped colonised land. The painting offers the viewer a superimposition of images which can be read from the background to the front of the picture, as a series of flashbacks, a sequence of dreams haunting the exposed woman's body and, at the same time, giving substance to her abandonment. The first glaring scene pictures the arrival of the Portuguese and the celebration of the first mass in Brazil, a representation of the symbolic union of the sword and the cross, itself observed by a group of red Indians; on the left side of the painting a huge turkey, exotically framed with white lilies, both animal and flower originating from Latin America; on the very top, in the left hand corner, a tiny woman whose white dress is stained in red, as if in flames, which could be read as a figure for witch-burning, an iconic memory of the Inquisition. As Memory Holloway writes,[7] the painting, distinctly composed of two parts, past and present, offers a commentary on power and authority, at the same time as it interrogates the mimetism of political and patriarchal colonisation, the twin fronts of the post-colonial debate. It is a powerful and excessive representation of the colonial excess.

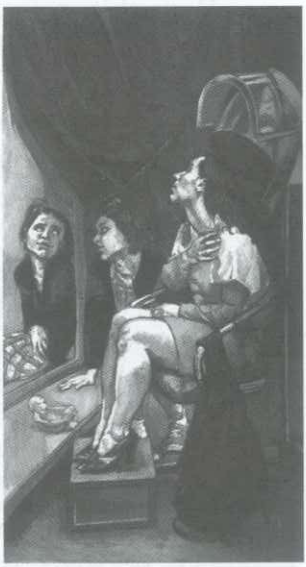
The second image I want to draw attention to is a triptych named *After Hogarth*, which offers Rego's visual comment on the 18th century triptych by William Hogarth, "Marriage à la Mode".

Rego was commissioned, together with twenty-three of the "world's leading contemporary artists to create an entirely new work in response to one of the greatest collections of European painting of the past (London's National Gallery)", as the catalogue to the exhibition indicates. The Exhibition was called *Encounters: New Art from Old* and took place in the Summer of 2000 in London (14 June to 17 September 2000).

>> *First Mass in Brazil*, Paula Rego (1993)

>> *Betrothal*, Paula Rego (1999)

>> *Lessons*, Paula Rego (1999)



>> *Wreck*, Paula Rego (1999)

Hogarth's paintings cited here are "The Marriage Settlement", "The Toilette" and "The Bagnio", dating from 1742-3.

Rego's visual commentary is a "modern love story", or so she claims, including an "arranged marriage", called "Betrothal"; a mother-daughter conversation in an old-fashioned hairdresser, which she called "Lessons"; and a third picture, the most powerful of all, a citation of the "Pietà", a visual tale of enduring love, devotion and suffering, a mother-son love story, here revised as "Wreck", enacting woman as a figure of resistance, both strong and protective.

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So, finally, can we say that there is a revolution in progress in the visual arts which accounts for the re-conceptualization and de-construction of patterns of identity and difference and that its project consists mainly in interrogating, transgressing, pushing to the limits the supposed "natural borders" between the genders and its inscription of their "material variety" in society? Throughout this essay I have tried to show how the blurring of the borderlines between the sublime and the abject, the aesthetic and the non aesthetic, and, above all, the disruptive invasion of the personal into the political play a major role in this process, and simultaneously constitute fundamental tensions within contemporary feminist thinking.[8] As Braidotti writes, "Feminist thinking takes place between the no longer and the not yet, in the in between zone between wilful, conscious political practice and the not necessarily conscious yearning for transformation and change" (Braidotti, 2000: 3). <<

NOTES

[1] See for example Hélène Cixous's claims in "The Laugh of the Medusa" ("Le rire de la méduse", *L'arc*, 1975): "Write your self. (...) Your body must be heard. (...) To write. An act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength (...) her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; (...) inscribe the breath of the whole woman" (1981: 250); or Luce Irigaray's famous text "Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un" (*Minuit*, 1977), as well as Julia Kristeva's "La Femme ce n'est jamais ça" (*Tel quel*, Autumn 1974).

[2] See in this context Griselda Pollock's discussion in "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories", in Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts* (1996) and Gisela Breitling, "Speech, Silence and the Discourse of Art", in Gisela Ecker (ed.), *Feminist Aesthetics* (1982). For a further discussion, see Parker and Pollock (1981); Pollock (1988); Susan Suleiman (1986); Linda Nochlin (1981) and Lynda Nead (1992). >>

[3] For an early but very thorough discussion of the state of women's contemporary art see Rosa Lee "Resisting Amnesia: Feminism, Painting and Postmodernism", *Feminist Review*, 26, Summer 1987, pp. 5-28. The number of publications in this field has had a considerable increase, suffices only to see the available number of anthologies and readers on "Visual Culture". For its large spectrum and its particular focus on feminist theory, see Price and Schildrick, *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (1996).

[4] In this context, see Craig Owens' essay "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post-Modernism", in Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1983), as well as Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Post-modernism* (1986) and Linda Hutcheon's, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988).

[5] This essay has been rewritten in Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents* (1998).

[6] These issues concerning the relation of Rego's work to postmodernism are developed in a previous essay of mine, "Through the Looking-Glass: Paula Rego's Visual Rhetoric, an 'Aesthetics of Danger' " (Macedo, 2001).

[7] As Memory Holloway writes in "Effet de mirroir: regard vers le passé, marche vers l' avenir": "Dans un sens nous pouvons lire la gravure comme s' il s' agissait d' un événement vu à travers d' une fênetre, une tactique habituelle de la peinture moderniste dans l' oeuvre de Matisse òu son emploi nous conduit à nous demander si nous devrions considerer la peinture comme un mur, une surface plate ou bien une fenêtre ouvrant sur le monde. Mais pour Paula Rego, la gravure aux multiples significations agit nettement sur le personage situé en dessous" (Holloway, 1999: 10).

[8] See in this context Moira Gatens and her assessment of the growing awareness around issues concerning the body: "There is probably no simple explanation for the recent proliferation of writings concerning the body. Clearly, Foucault's work has been influential in making the body a favoured subject for analysis in contemporary philosophy, sociology and anthropology. However, the impact of feminist theory in the social sciences has no less a claim to credit for bringing the body into the limelight" (Gatens, 1996: 67).

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