

# The Granddaughters' Generation: Feminism and Art History Now

*A symposium in honour of Linda Nochlin  
on the occasion of her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday*

*Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2011  
Cruciform Lecture Theatre 1  
University College London*

## Programme and Abstracts

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**10.00 Welcome and introduction**

***Francesca Berry***

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**Session 1: Labour**

***Chair: Catherine Grant***

**10.10 Mère-Ménagère:**

***The Politics of 'Domestic' Labour in Édouard Vuillard's Practice***

**Dr Francesca Berry**  
***University of Birmingham***

This paper brings together three issues at the heart of Linda Nochlin's feminist art-historical practice: gendered artistic agency, the family in nineteenth-century France and the politics of the representation of women's labour. I will focus upon the Nabis artist Édouard Vuillard's 1890s images of his mother's domestic labour, located in the Parisian apartments that mother and son shared and which were also the site of other kinds of labour: Vuillard's 'studio-bedroom' practice and Madame Vuillard's corsetry business. I have published on Vuillard's representation of domestic and professional labour before; from a socialist-feminist perspective. But in the spirit of Nochlin's 'ad hoc' approach that refutes the possibilities of a single methodological framework and is ill at ease with claims to interpretational closure, I would like to take this opportunity to consider more closely the domestic labour images and the personal and social relationships that informed them. I will take my lead from Nochlin's analysis of Morisot's *Wet-Nurse* (1879), an essay that typically unpacked a set of social and representational paradoxes: a painting that is the product of a bourgeois mother's professional practice enabled by the waged labour of a working-class woman depicted breastfeeding Morisot's child. Formally, it bears the traces of this personal, social and economic confrontation. An equivalent but not identical set of paradoxes informs my understanding of Vuillard's practice: paintings that are the enabled product and manifestation of his and his mother's domestic labour, one professional, the other unwaged. Nochlin argued in respect of the wet-nurse's labour that Morisot 'introduced what is not seen but what is known into the visible'. An equivalent can be argued for Vuillard's representation of his mother cooking, drying dishes and sweeping: he brought into visibility as a modernist motif the *ménagère* and her labour. Nochlin concluded of *The Wet-Nurse* that 'Morisot is in the picture too, being forced to face the real conditions of her life and relations with a fellow woman'. It remains to be seen whether Vuillard's agency can be articulated in equivalently self-reflexive terms, not least when it is sexual rather than class difference that the artist confronts.

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### **10.30 Not Working**

**Dr Jo Applin**  
***University of York***

What does it mean for an artist to ‘work’, or to ‘not work’? What kind of labour is involved in the task of making a work of art? This paper analyses the various ways in which women artists engaged, challenged, reorganized and even refused the idea of work in the 1960s, at a time prior to the establishment of a formalized feminist politics to which to subscribe, and certainly before the idea of the ‘woman artist’ carried much weight either institutionally or critically. I do not take as given the fact that as women artists they should automatically be studied in isolation. On the contrary, by situating my study in the art world of 1960s New York, arguably the centre of the artistic avant-garde at that time, I will tackle head on the *problems* of incorporation and inclusion and the implications of this for a feminist art history—issues first addressed by Linda Nochlin in the early seventies. Taking Nochlin’s work as a starting point, I will consider the working environment of these artists and the various ways and means through which they forged, negotiated or even *refused* a subject position—and a voice—for themselves within the avant-garde artistic community.

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### **10.50 Hand-me-down History: *Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn as a Feminist***

**Dr Harriet Riches**  
***Kingston University***

Just as the influence of Linda Nochlin’s practice is indelibly traced in the work of any art historian informed by feminism, her writings, thought and methods continue to affect the teaching of the discipline. In this paper I will consider how her feminist approach is of particular value in teaching practice-based fine art students for whom art history is often encountered as a similar yet different parallel discourse in which objectivity and distance is valued over the necessary subjectivity of their home discipline. From providing the polemical and challenging texts through which students’ consciousness is raised, to validating alternative methodologies in which we might relocate the personal and the subjective in a discipline in which that position is often evacuated, under-valued or denied, Nochlin’s art history feeds into emerging art practice. Addressing her attention to the marginal, the fragmentary and the overlooked, her ‘ad hoc’ approach to theory and the transformative power of her methodological bricolage, and drawing on Luce Irigaray’s recent work on understanding teaching as a reciprocal relationship and inter-subjective space in which notions of thinking, dwelling and listening counter conventional models of authoritative pedagogy, I will reflect on a series of critical incidents from my own teaching practice. In relation to the questions of agency, authorship and autonomy with which a new generation of emerging female artists continue to struggle, how might we, as the ‘granddaughters’ of feminist art history look to the past in order to inform the future? How can we engage with the genealogy of the discipline as we hand down to a new generation models of self-located practice and embodied knowledge from which agency might emerge, at a historical moment of increasing conservatism in which, as Nochlin suggests, we need “all our wit and courage to make sure that women’s voices are heard, their work seen and written about” just as much as ever before?

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### **11.10 Discussion**

### **11.30 TEA BREAK**

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## Session 2: Fragments

**Chair: Tamara Trodd**

### 12.00 *On the other Hand, On the Fragment*

**Dr Amy Mechowski**  
*Victoria and Albert Museum*

For this paper I have taken inspiration from Linda Nochlin's lecture and subsequent publication *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (1994) in which the 'fragment' serves as the subject matter and defines the formal structure of the paper itself. I will take as my launching point the exhibition *The White Marmorean Flock: Nineteenth-Century American Women Neoclassical Sculptors*, and its accompanying exhibition catalogue, which took place at Vassar College Art Gallery in April 1972. This exhibition was staged while Nochlin was still a member of the Faculty of Arts and just one year after the publication of her seminal article "Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists?". My focus is a case study of Harriet Hosmer's *Clasped Hands of the Brownings*, produced in 1853, which, though complete as a work in its own right, consists of isolated parts of the body. In keeping with the subject addressed and strategy employed by Nochlin in *The Body in Pieces*, I will consider Hosmer's work as a fragment both literally and metaphorically, within the context of a modernity that was marked by social, political and psychic fragmentation, for American women sculptors in Rome and for Hosmer in particular.

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### 12.20 *On Ruth Vollmer and Minimalism's Marginalia*

**Dr Anna Lovatt**  
*University of Nottingham*

This paper considers the work of sculptor Ruth Vollmer (1903-82), who began her artistic career late in life, after emigrating from Germany to the United States in 1935. During the 1960s, Vollmer was a key figure in the New York art world, holding salons at her home attended by Robert Smithson, Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt, amongst others. These younger artists published writings on her work and acquired key pieces of her sculpture for their own collections. But while their work is now celebrated, Vollmer's practice has been neglected in historical accounts of the period. Supporters and critics alike have attributed this marginalisation to the latent 'untimeliness' of her sculpture, which often appears out-of-sync with dominant chronologies of Sixties art. Rather than refuting this charge, or attempting to rehabilitate Vollmer as a 'great,' forgotten artist, I will argue that the 'marginal' and 'anachronistic' aspects of her practice reflect her identity as an exiled subject, whose career was riven by geographical displacement and chronological disjunction. In conclusion, I will suggest that the peripatetic and participatory aspects of her sculpture – often dismissed during the 1960s – have acquired new significance in the context of contemporary art.

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### 12.40 *Corps Etranger: The Body In Pieces*

**Cadence Kinsey**  
*UCL*

In depersonalizing the solemn occasion of the public execution; in serializing and standardizing the act; in the supposed scientific efficacy of its technology; and, above all, in its 'instantaneity', its reduction of the temporal span associated with death to a mere blink of the eye, the guillotine was viewed as a specifically contemporary instrument of state-sanctioned death. (Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces*)

In Linda Nochlin's account of the fragmentation of the body as a metaphor for modernity, the guillotine is afforded a rather peculiar significance as it both slices the corporeal, material body and reduces the temporal span of phenomenological perception. The body is cut up and frozen by the gaze.

In this paper I consider the ways in which new medical imaging technologies fragment and isolate parts or organs of the body, producing a literal *body in pieces*, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between these technologies and female bodies including, but not limited to, gynaecological and fetal imaging. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's notion of 'medical pornography' I argue that medical imaging is premised on the same epistemic value as that of both clinical anatomy and pornography: that to see is to know and that it frustrates the very desire it stimulates by promising more than it delivers. In both of these realms, the close-up dismembers women's bodies into exchange-value parts (e.g. 'the beaver shot').

The medical gaze has thus far functioned as the guillotine: slicing the body into quantifiable, readable and analyzable parts (read in relation to the functioning of an Aristotelian 'whole') and freezing or locking the body in to a system of representation outside of historical or temporal context. The object of clinical representation is to bring together schematic, textual and realistic renderings of the body in one perceptual layer, as pure surface. The dislocation between the represented organ and the body/self in medical imaging thus creates isolated, floating signifiers that are visual representations without depth: by becoming superficial, the body becomes legible/textual (what Elisabeth Grosz has described as 'etching').

In contrast to such models, I take Mona Hatoum's work *Corps Etranger* (1994) (in which an endoscope travels through various orifices of her body) as a possible counter to the guillotine-like gaze of medical imaging. The recorded images are projected in a continuous stream and, unlike medical images, are non-deictic so that we are unable to locate ourselves spatially in relation to the 'whole', causing her body to reject clinical reading and becoming, to a degree, illegible. *Corps Etranger* thus exhibits a continual play on the terms surface/depth and interior/exterior.

That the endoscope is equipped with tools to cut and cauterize abnormal sections of the gastrointestinal tract, suggests that it is both designed and used with the expectation of encountering pathology: it is both diagnostic and therapeutic. Hatoum's use of the endoscope in *Corps Etranger* thus doubly undermines the original function of the technology, putting it to new and novel uses. In Hatoum's body the interior spaces exhibit no pathology so there is nothing for the endoscope to 'see' and nothing for it to treat. Hatoum thus abstracts the body from the pathological, challenging the operation of medical imaging in a system of representation based on the deviant.

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## 13.00 Discussion

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13.20 – 14.30 LUNCH BREAK

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## Session 3: Age and Generations

Chair: Jo Applin

### 14.30 *Danse Macabre: Pina Bausch's Kontakthof*

**Dr Philippa Kaina**  
UCL

This paper considers a recent staging of Pina Bausch's *Kontakthof* (1978) at the Barbican Centre, London. Consisting of non-professional dancers drawn from the district of Wuppertal (the home of Bausch's *Tanztheater* company) the performance run alternated two different casts; one comprising teenagers, the other 'ladies and gentleman over 65'. Dressed in formal attire (males in dark suits, females in colourful evening dresses and high heels) and divided along gendered lines, the dancers perform what are best described as a series of elaborate mating rituals to a soundtrack of sentimental German songs from the 1930s. Although the adolescent and senior dancers enact identical choreographic sequences each performance, according to their different ages, is inflected very differently.

It is the compelling nuances between the two renditions on which this paper will focus as a starting point for an exploration of the 'subjectivity' of life stages or generational categories, particularly that of 'old age'. Here the paper will consider the work's title (*Kontakthof*, translated as 'contact yard' or 'court' is, in German, a broad term for a meeting place) and its mise-en-scène (a bleak stage set resembling a municipal dance hall or rehearsal space) as metaphors for the public and institutional spaces of communal interaction – nursery, playground, school, night-club, dance-hall, hospital, care-home – where social lives are lived out and which mark our passage from the cradle to the grave.

While the performance of the older dancers in *Kontakthof* functions as an important rejoinder to the pervasive marginalization of the ageing subject in contemporary western culture, this state of affairs is also reflected by this age category's under-representation in academic critical discourse, most significantly in the fields of art history, feminist studies and psychoanalysis. It is this paper's aim therefore to demonstrate that 'age categories' represent an immensely rich, but as yet under-explored, field of critical enquiry, which also have an important role to play in reconfiguring the 'subject' of feminist art history.

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### 14.50 *The Bride and her Bachelors: Tacita Dean and the Large Glass as Film Machine*

**Dr Tamara Trodd**  
*University of Edinburgh*

Tacita Dean's film, *Craneway Event* (2009) is the second of two works she has made about the American choreographer Merce Cunningham, and is only the latest in the long list of her works focusing on old men, and old male artists, in particular (past examples include works on WG Sebald, Mario Merz, Joseph Beuys and Michael Hamburger). Watching this recent film, I wondered, do these works simply reconfirm these old men's creative and authorial mastery, or is there any critical element? Isn't there any dissatisfaction for Dean in focusing on these old-master figures, let alone as a woman, but as a younger artist? Isn't there any Oedipus? And yet, after all, what kind of Oedipus could there be, for a female subject? How can daughters inherit? Far from being new, these questions may be understood as only one aspect of the problematic opened by almost forty years ago by Linda Nochlin's famous paper, 'Why have there been no great women artists?' (1971).

There is another dimension to the legacy/inheritance question in Dean's work, and this is her return to obsolescent structures, forms and materials; often seen as emblemized in her use of archaic, obsolescent technology and the fetishistic cult she risks making of 16mm

projection. These aspects of Dean's work have been written about in terms of loss and mourning, citing in particular Walter Benjamin's theorisation of aura. Dean's fascination with old men and/or old artists is part of this same logic, she has indicated. These men themselves are obsolescent, but precious and worth preserving.

Attending to both dimensions, then, of machinery and machine-aesthetics together with old male artists' creative authority, the question this paper will explore is whether Dean's work is simply nostalgic, or whether it has a critical edge? Applying these questions specifically to film-making and looking at *Craneway Event* in particular I shall suggest that the work of Marcel Duchamp, especially his *Large Glass* (1915-23), understood as a machine for projection, supplies a helpful model for interpreting Dean's film; helping to keep a Duchampian edge to our perception of her work and not allowing our understanding of it to fall too far into Benjaminian nostalgia-aesthetics.

### **15.10 'A Matter of Skin': Chantal Ackerman's Porous Narratives**

**Maud Jacquin**

*UCL*

In 2004, Chantal Akerman created two works - a feature film *Tomorrow We Move* and a video installation *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge* - which feature the diary that her Jewish maternal grandmother had kept before dying at Auschwitz. The diary opens with the words: "I am a woman! Therefore I cannot express all my feelings, my thoughts, my sorrows in a loud voice".

In this paper I will consider the in-between space of these two works in relation to women's writing and narrative forms. Prompted by the contradictions manifest in the installation (spontaneity vs. control; uniqueness vs. familiarity), I will argue for an intricate interrelation between the documentary video and the fiction film. Movement and porousness are also central to the thematics of both video and film, opening up new ways of thinking about writing as an act of absorption. Drawing on Virginia Woolf's writings and Gilles Deleuze's commentary on Woolf, I propose that Akerman's works reveal one of the tensions at the core of "Deleuzian feminism" between women's political need for a space of enunciation and Deleuze's model of a depersonalised but highly receptive subject.

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### **15.30 Fans of Feminism: Rethinking Generations in Contemporary Feminist Art**

**Dr Catherine Grant**

*Goldsmiths & Courtauld Institute of Art*

Gertrude Stein wrote that "Most of you know that in a funny kind of way you are nearer your grandparents than your parents."<sup>1</sup> In her discussion of how to understand the contemporary in relation to art and literature she considers the ways in which historical moments loop back and forward, without a straightforward progression. I want to consider the blind spots, reversals and fantasies present in a generational model in relation to a number of contemporary artworks that engage with histories of second-wave feminism, using the figure of the fan to explore the appeal of second-wave feminism in the contemporary moment. Although intellectually I can be described as 'third generation', rather than positioning myself as a granddaughter of feminism (or feminist art history), what seems more significant is that many second-wave feminists are now grandmothers. Being roughly the same age as many children of second-wave feminists, I am placed in the

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<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Stein, "How Writing Is Written" (1935), in *How Writing is Written: Volume II of the Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas, Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974, pp. 151-160; p. 152.

position of the daughter who is now a mother herself. So perhaps the question should be: what changes when a mother becomes a grandmother and a daughter becomes a mother?

The generational tension found in artworks that revisit this historical moment will be discussed in relation to fandom as a way into the desiring and devouring interest that complicates familial models of feminist generations. Considering a range of contemporary artworks, examples include Mary Kelly's recent project *Love Songs, 2005-07*, which includes fragments of interviews from women who were involved in feminism in the 1970s, contrasted with a younger generation, and the zines of the Brooklyn based collective LTTR which recreate a space of feminist collectivity within a queer art context.

**15.50 Discussion**

**16.15 TEA BREAK**

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**16.45 Response and Discussion with Linda Nochlin**  
**Chaired by Tamar Garb**

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**18.00 Drinks reception**  
**North Cloisters, Wilkins Building**

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