“Making” History in the feminine:
Genealogical encounters at the Berlin Biennial 2008

Dr Sue Tate

In Berlin one is constantly aware of ‘history’ – particularly of the traumatic events of the 20th century (Nazi regime, Holocaust, Cold War) which, in the 21st, have been expressed in the fabric of the visual culture of the city: the Reichstag, wrapped by Christo, domed by Foster, Libeskind’s Jewish Museum, the 2,711 stelae of Eisenman’s Holocaust Memorial and so on. In 2008 the curators of the 5th Berlin Biennial deliberately chose four sites1 that were redolent of that history and of Modernism as a cultural movement, and invited artists to respond. Five of them were also given the opportunity to curate a show of an artist or designer of their choice from the previous generation, to …be in dialogue with some of the newly commissioned art works presented elsewhere in the 5th Biennial, offering audiences a view into the way younger artists engage with another generation and with counter currents of the modernist experiment” (Biennial handout. My emphasis.)

New historicism has taught us that history is not a fixed, objective truth, to be directly accessed through due diligence – but a narrative construction that, having meaning and relevance for the present, shapes the future2. The history of the 20th century and of Modernism has, of course, been ‘made’ in the male mould, dominated by male voices and perceptions3 (see above). Yet at the 2008 Berlin Biennial there was gender balance in the curating team (Adam Szymczk and Elena Filipovic), approximately half of the artists exhibiting and three out of five of the curator-artists were women: a truly striking improvement on conditions a mere 30 or so years ago when it was ‘normal’ for men to form an overwhelming majority and often 100% of group shows of contemporary

---

1 KW Institute in Berlin Mitte, KW Institute in Berlin Mitte, the heart of all 5 Biennials– under the GDR a collectivised margarine factory; after re unification, was squatted by artists; remnants of its factory use (broken tiles, cement pillars,) have been deliberately left, to maintain the ‘atmosphere of a former site of production’. Skulpturenpark Berlin_Zentrum is a weed ridden sandy, stony gap in the city that has little park like about it; was part of the Death Strip beside the Wall subsequently entrepreneurial speculation got caught in the economic turmoil of reunification – a marker of the failure of capitalism. In 2006 6 artists formed a collective to use it as a site for art work that reflected on this difficult history.


3 Walter Benjamin’s history of the victors.
work. In what ways might this cultural space, so hard won and so recently available to women, be used to articulate differently gendered ‘counter currents’, to ‘making’ history ‘in, of and from the feminine’ (to borrow a pivotal phrase from Griselda Pollock⁴) and thus to imagining a different future?

Amid a myriad of responses to the ‘Modernist experiment’ I was particularly struck by the contributions of three women, all born in the 1970s, who set up dialogues in their work with the practice of women artists or designers active in first half of the 20th century. An international crew they were the Iranian Nairy Baghramian working with Swiss Janette Laverriere (b. 1909); German artist Susanne Winterling responding to Irish architect and designer Eileen Gray (1878-1976) and Paulina Olowska to her Polish compatriot Zofia Stryjenska (1891-1974). Baghramian and Olowska developed those dialogues further by curating exhibitions in the Schinkle Pavillon of Laverriere and Stryjenska (both of whom have been, relatively, ‘lost to history’): the former exhibition opened just before and the latter just after the Biennial itself, thus bracketing the whole show.

The artists might be seen as ‘making’ history in a quite literal sense: in the physical facture of a contemporary practice that looks back, beyond second wave feminism, to speak in the present to a current audience.⁵ Encountering their work I am drawn into an affirming, interwoven, relationship with a generation prior to, and one younger than, my own; inspired by and writing about it as a feminist art historian, cognitively formed in second wave knowledges and understandings, I am ‘making’ history in the more conventional sense. Drawing on the work of Luce Irigaray and Christine Battersby, I offer a narrative that sees the work in terms of woman-to-woman genealogies and a nascent feminist aesthetics. Along with theorists Griselda Pollock and Hillary Robinson, these philosophers might be seen, in this paper, as my cognitive ‘woman-to-woman genealogy’, intersecting with that of the artists and enabling the particular and motivated shape I give to the historical and current, ‘political’, significance

---

⁴ A concept developed in the context of and used as subtitle to Inside the Visible an elliptical traverse of 20th century art MIT Press 1995. See
⁵ Refusing the danger Benjamin, Walter, reminds us of, that ‘every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.’ “Thesis on the Philosophy of History;” in Illuminations, Pimlico, 1999, p.247.
of the work. My hope is that this cross generational segue between theory and practice will have resonance for the artists and for a wider audience and thus contribute to the unrolling debate that is ‘making’ history in a third sense - the next instalment of the feminist project.

**Coming to the encounter**

My route to the encounter in Berlin in 2008 started in Somerset in the Spring of 2005. I had been researching Pauline Boty, the British Pop artist who died, young, in 1966, and had identified in her work a proto feminist engagement with mass culture that had been problematic to, and thus, until recently, excluded from, the feminist art historical narrative. I hypothesised (in 2004) that her oeuvre, when better known, would be meaningful to a current generation of women artists negotiating a media saturated landscape. Paulina Olowska (who has been described as engaging in a ‘life long feminist project; albeit one that confuses the boundaries of feminism’) had come across a painting by Boty in Lodz museum in Poland and, finding great resonance with her own work, she tracked me down: a splendid materialisation of my theoretical hypothesis. A day of fervent discussion and pouring over my archive gave rise to a joint article in *Swingset* and a 10’ high painting by Paulina exhibited in London: *Pauline Boty Acts Out One of Her Paintings For a Popular Magazine*. These collaborations fed into my reading of the historiographical importance of women Pop artists, published in *Feminism Reframed* - a response, of course, to Pollock and Parker’s ovarial book *Framing Feminism* of 40 years earlier - and Olowska’s painting was used as the cover image. So already, a segue between theory and practice, a weave between different generations, already a layered history-making taking place. And, coming to Berlin, naturally I experienced Olowska’s work by her side.

Feminism, of course, is a political project, not just a methodological approach, and the feminist intellectual in the cultural field works not just to understand the world

---

6 PhD thesis *Gendering the Field: Pauline Boty and the Predicament of the Woman Pop Artist in the British Pop Art Movement.*


but to change it. I have shared in the emotional journey of the second wave, from the exhilaration of engaging in paradigm-shifting thinking and research and a sense of conviction in the 80s that irrevocable change had been effected, to a growing weariness with constantly maintaining a critical stance in the face of a misogynist backlash (Faludi, 1992). The 21st century brings an awareness that, whilst there have been huge advances for women, in many ways change has not been effected despite the rigour and excellence of the critique that has been presented. And now, along with many others, I feel concern that second wave understandings are being historicised (fixed in a defined past, rendered passé and irrelevant) and a fear that what McRobbie has recently termed the ‘disarticulation’ (the ‘undoing’) of feminist ideas will cause an irreparable rupture from the current generation. Collaborating with Olowska and my encounter with her work and that of Baghramian and Wintering in Berlin, with its intergenerational historical reach, gives me cause for optimism in the face of some of these fears.10

In *Gender and Genius* Christine Battersby offers a historical understanding of the predicament of women artists, when she sees them as not just ‘outside tradition’, but as actually *structuring the spaces* between the “bold lines” picked out by conventional art historians and commentators. It is only now, she argues, “after a lengthy period of sustained effort by feminist historians and critics, that are we at last learning to see the depth of those spaces”.11 Exploring those depths to develop a feminist aesthetics will take more, she argues, than just slotting women artists into existing histories. They must be positioned

in two different, but overlapping patterns: the matrilineal and patrilineal line of influence and response that swirl through (and across) the intricate network of relationships out of which we shape our past.

Crucially, though,

- to understand what the woman artist is doing, and the merits or demerits of her work, she will have to be located in a separate female pattern that, so to speak, runs through the [male pattern] in a kind of contrapuntal way.”

---

10 In the last two years I have also seen, among my students and in activist groups in Bristol UK, the green shoots of a younger generation turning to feminism to provide a framework or platform from which to understand and grapple with their own dilemmas and experiences of the world.
I will argue that the work in the Biennial performs such contrapuntal swirls and makes visible a ‘separate female pattern’; and I do this in the belief that it matters beyond the academic task of rectifying art history. Irigaray has drawn attention to the desperately damaging effects of our (male) ‘monoculture’ in which women are ‘unrealised’ and men, cut off from relationality, are, in her term, ‘unblossomed’ and promotes the necessity for a female subjectivity to be identified and cultivated in order ‘to reach a more just and fulfilled culture’.12 What that subjectivity might be, how to cultivate it, can seem impossibly difficult and slippery, but surely a truly avant gardist task appropriate to fine art. Hilary Robinson, in *Reading Art Reading Irigaray*, exploring the role of fine art practice and criticism, identifies, in Irigaray’s writing, two necessary elements: the establishment of woman-to-woman genealogies, ‘that create the possible space for a ‘becoming’ as women’,13 and the concomitant development of a syntax appropriate to a female morphology. The idea of an ‘appropriate syntax’ is complex and perhaps contentious, but, as Robinson advises, I have tried to stay ‘attentive’ to it as ‘a cultural reserve yet to come’, testing and exploring ‘its gestures and practices’.14 Conventionally a genealogy is a line traced through the proper name, the name of the father, within which women appear only provisionally. But, in *Sexual Subversions*, reflecting on the contribution of Irigaray and other feminist philosophers, Elizabeth Grosz offers a very different definition

> A genealogy maps the interconnections between the production of knowledges, bodies and powers. It is thus a motivated history, a history of the ‘birth’ and transformation of contemporary institutions, practices and procedures.15

It is in such a ‘motivated’ history, transformative of both present and future, in which I am interested and believe the art work to be engaged.

---

12 *Luce Irigary Key Writings* ed Luce Irigary, . Continuum, London and New York, 2004. p. viii and x. Not to put too fine a point on it, she goes on to assert “Working for the liberation or construction of a feminine subjectivity and a culture of two subjects, we are really working towards the liberation of humanity itself, towards another time of our becoming as humans”. (xv)
13 Robinson 2006 *Reading Art Reading Irigaray* I.B. Taurus, p.151
14 Ibid p.93
15 GROSZ Elizabeth *Sexual Subversions* Allen and Unwin 1989. xviii
**Architectural locations for the encounter**

Baghramian, Winterling and Olowska had all been commissioned to make work to show in the Neue Nationalgalerie, designed by Meis van de Rohe who was the last Director of the Bauhaus when it was closed down by the Nazi’s, and became an international Modernist hero in exile. (Fig 1).

![Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin 1968](image1.jpg)

When the wall went up Meis was ‘urgently persuaded’ to take the commission for a national art gallery in West Berlin and its role in the politics of the cold war was clear as a symbol of the ‘free world’ and a form of cultural reparation (bringing Mies home). A modular, symmetrical glass box, built on a platform to abstract it from its specific urban surroundings, the Neue Nationalgalerie expresses Meis’ concept of a transparent, ‘universal space’. Its grand sweep of unbroken space, lack of walls, dominant grid structure and intimidating scale have always made it somewhat problematic as an art gallery.

![Neue Nationalgalerie. Biennial 2008](image2.jpg)
The design was lifted almost entirely from an earlier project for the Bacardi Rum Company in Cuba, 1957 but the ‘universalising’ aim of absolute transparency was thwarted by the particularity of the *actual* local weather conditions. The contrast between internal and external temperature in mittel europa produced copious condensation that obscured the view causing huge consternation to Mies and his office but to which no technical solutions could be found. Finally curtains were resorted to as the only answer (literally blocking the transparency of the building).

So the setting for my encounters is an ‘iconic’ example of masculinist, Modernist architectural principles, ironically flawed and redolent of political and aesthetic meaning structures to which many of the 23 artists showing at the Neue Nationalgalerie made an explicit response. Some of the men might be seen to be throwing down an Oedipal challenge and a number of women artists offered clearly gendered responses from the elegiac (Aleana Egan *ended casually in water*, a lyrical blue line wandering across the grid structures) to the provocatively witty (Paola Pivi *If you like it, thankyou, if you don’t like it I’m sorry, enjoy it anyway* – shaped like a portcullis, encountered as you enter the vast hall, dangerously pointed and clothed in gaudy fake jewels). My focus, however, is on the way in which the “matrilineal lines of influence” introduced by Baghramian, Olowska and Winterling swirled through this masculine space.

The Schinkel Pavillon (Fig 3), used for the artist curated shows, is a historical fiction, newly built in 1967-69 in neo classical style in the garden of the war ruined Crown Prince’s Palace, and was part of the GDR concept of a cultural down town for the east German capital.

If the Schinkel Pavillon might be set against the Neue Nationalgalerie in terms of Cold War politics, aesthetically it also offers a contrasting environment that could be thought of in gendered terms: the size and proportions are to human scale (lacking the bombast and dogma of the Neue Nationalgalerie) and the octagonal form is implicitly

---

16 For example: Piotr Uklanski’s *Untitled (Fist)* (an empty gesture monumentalised) and Cyprien Gaillard *La Canarde de Beaugrenelle* (a sculpture from a failed modernist housing estate) comment on the failure of Modernism. Others mockingly challenge Modernist certainties about the purity of form and the coding of cultural value eg Gabriel Kuri *Items in Care of Items* Jacob Mishori 4 paintings from *Bites of Small Fish* (combining abstract forms with kitsch images, with gay overtones); Marc Camille Chaimowicz *For MVR* which, ‘dresses and domesticates’ a corner of the building.
non hierarchical: discouraging binary oppositions and encouraging a relational, interactive display and viewing practice.


A contrapuntal riff

The first artist curated show at the Schinkle was in fact a collaboration between the nonagenarian, Janette Laverriere (b.1909), a Swiss born, Paris based designer who, while successful, was never granted a place in the canon, and the Iranian artist, Nairy Baghramian, born 62 years later (1971). Laverriere’s ‘history and aesthetics fuel Baghramian’s interest’ (catalogue) and there are clear correspondences between their work: an interest in the relationship between interior and exterior spaces, in mirrors, and in the organisation of designed objects within architectural space. Together they designed an exhibition structure within the octagonal gallery; at the centre a shelving system, similar to an early ‘Modernist’ designs by Laverriere, displaying a collection of books that have influenced the two practitioners, for example Baudrillard’s *System of Objects* and *The Power of Display* by Staniszewski, making clear the ‘postmodern’ knowingness of this project as a site of meaning making. Mirrors or mirrored objects designed by Laverriere, hung on both interior (dark green) and exterior (white) sides of

---

17 Baghramian’s *Es is ausser der Haus*, 2006, Basel, played with all these themes.
the walls: many were made recently and, without the constraints of commissions, give free reign to her delight in allegory and reference.

In *Sexes and Genealogies* Irigary argues that if the hierarchical difference between the sexes is to be overcome, and “for a dialectic of the couple to occur we need an art of perception that cannot be reduced to pure innerness or pure outerness but passes ceaselessly between the two”\(^\text{18}\): Similarly Bracha Ettinger’s concept of ‘the matrix’, extensively drawn on by Pollock in considering a female subjectivity, rejects the ‘inside versus outside polarity’. These are perceptions expressed visually in the collaborative work of Laverriere and Baghramian. Within the Schinkel Pavillon, the interior and exterior of the exhibition structure, rather than being in opposition, are, in constant interplay as it unwinds, as it were, into the gallery space to create a kind of ‘outer promenade’ around it (Fig 4), which is in turn inside the pavilion itself: we look out to the ‘outside world’, the natural light pours in.

![Fig 4 La Lampe dans l'horloge](image)

A key work by Laverriere is the encased mirror entitled *La Commune, hommage à Louise Michel* 2001. (Fig 5): heroine of the revolutionary Paris Commune of 1871 and much respected in her own time Louise Michel is another (female) figure now largely ‘lost to history’\(^\text{19}\). The bullet holes that puncture the casing and the cartridges that form its hinge, reference the bloodshed of the defeat of the Commune when as many as 30,000 communard’s were summarily executed. The cut out shape (a cherry) and the text reference a song –*Les temps de cerise* (“the time of cherries”), written in 1866, which

---

\(^\text{18}\) *Sexes and Genealogies* p. 144. (*Inside the Visible*)

\(^\text{19}\) Louise Michel b.1830-1905: teacher and courageous political activist; ambulance driver, soldier and heroine of the Paris Commune of 1871: a crowd of 10,000 greeting her in Paris when she returned from deportation, to which she had been sentenced at the fall of Commune.
became associated, after the fact, with the commune and has resonance (the time of uprising, energy, engagement) for leftist/anarchist activists to this day.

For her piece in the Neue Nationalgalerie Baghramian appropriated the main shape of the casing and the bullet holes but uses a radical change of scale and a doubling of the form to take on the scale and meanings of the building (Fig 6).

In an essay in the Biennial catalogue, Colomina points out that Mies’s designs for a transparent ‘universal space’, rather than setting up a dialogue between interior and
exterior, flattens the view of the outside world into the effect of a 2D screen image: “In a sense there is no outside in Meis. The interior simply expands to absorb everything.”

In her double genealogy of female homage (to Laverriere and back through her to Louise Michelle) Baghramian draws attention to and challenges Mies van der Rohe’s dogmatic abstractions by placing her doubled upright, nearly 2 meter high forms, inside and outside the glass wall. The lyrical form of the black metal plates, bearing their bullet shot wounds, are sprung, held in tension, and, gracefully poised, drawing the viewer into a bodily experienced engagement.

Fearing too literal a reading I tentatively reference Irigaray’s *This Sex That is No One* which puns on the idea that the female sex, within a male monoculture, isn’t allowed to be one and that its morphology it is not singular, is not only one – the two lips of the vagina constantly touching. The dual forms (the literal repetition), the two ‘lips’ of the sculpture, quite other to Phallic singularity, gently and assertively embrace Mies’ stark glass wall, articulating an interior -exterior relationship which the building itself signally failed to do. The holes however, never quite line up – we never get a view right through, the line of vision also held in the two lips of the sculpture. The two bases are identical white rectangles (‘Modernist’ forms) – but outside the base has been marked with the random black patternings of skateboard wheels while the interior base remains pristine white. Interior and exterior are accepted as responsive to different constituencies, but are held in *relationship* by the work. The piece ‘works’ as an affective experience expressed in formal terms.

The title, *La Colonne Casse 1871*, (‘the broken column’) opens up other lines of influence. The date of the commune further links it to Lavarriere’s piece, but ‘the colonne casse’ is a reference to the Vendome Column in Paris, hated symbol of the Napoleonic power which Gustave Courbet, realist avant garde painter and Louise Michel’s fellow communard, proposed should be disassembled as it expressed no more than ‘ideas of war and conquest’. It was in fact pulled down and Courbet, held responsible for its destruction, was himself to be broken, by the outcome of imprisonment and fines and died in exile. A broken column has, of course, phallic connotations and Baghramian,

---

while challenging the dominant (gendered) meanings of the Neue Nationalgalerie (its self expressive of Cold War hostilities), is opening up a relationship with a politically radical counter current in the male line.

A further ‘swirl’ takes us back to another mirror in the Schinkle, *A Gustave Courbet* 2001, (Fig 7) playing further on the contrapuntal riff between matrilineal and patrilineal lines of influence. Irigaray, of course, has used the metaphor of the mirror to describe the way in which the representation of ‘woman’, constructed by man as other to his same, works like a polished ‘flat’ mirror; ‘empty of altering reflections’ to do no more than reflect his own subjectivity.

![Fig 7 Homage a Gustav Courbet (my photo)](image)

But here Laverriere disrupts the flat surface, the two dimensionality of its representational function (as she does, in different ways, in most of her mirrored works\(^{21}\)) most of the surface is deep blue glass in which an upright almond of mirror is set, a vulvic form, minimalist in its simplicity, cupped by amber coloured labial curves that read three dimensionally, anchored to the frame by black circular and diagonal lines. The reference is of course, to Courbet’s *Origin of the world* an image that might crudely be described as a ‘beaver shot.’ For Laverriere, however, Courbet’s painting is not an objectification, it is a “*a provocation which puts the woman in the limelight. There is a*

---

\(^{21}\) Casings, shutters, a floating Cheshire cat smile, and in *Dorian Grey* the use of a convex mirror
respect for women in this subject.” 22 This chimes with Irigaray’s argument that the erasure of the image of the labia from the iconography of patriarchal culture contributes to the severance of the maternal from the sexual woman, blocking access to a full subjectivity. 23 When you look into this mirror, man or woman, you see yourself as if beyond the reflective surface, experience yourself as if deep inside (your place of origin).

This reading of Courbet’s work reverberates back onto the dual forms of Baghramian’s La Colonne Casse, perhaps allowing me more confidence in applying the Irigarayaian reading of it as the lips that are not one. Furthermore, it offers a particular re-engagement with issues around the portrayal of female sexuality that, I would suggest, has relevance to a current generation struggling with the implications of what Arial Levy 24 has termed ‘raunch culture’. Certainly the cross generational dialogue, developed in the masculinist space of the Neue Nationalgalerie by Baghramian, ‘made’ in work responsive to ‘the intricate network of relationships out of which we shape our past’ (Battersby) is full of hope, speaking to the present and the future. The words on La Commune, Homage a Louise Michel are not taken from the lyrics of the song (as Laverriere’s biographer mistakenly states) but are the artists own. ‘Il reviendra, les temps de cerise’, she promises her 21st century audience: ‘they will return, the days of the cherries.’

Resisting erasure

Susanne Winterling’s (b.1970) also takes on or challenges Mies’s building in an engagement with the life and work of Eileen Gray, virtuoso designer and architect, who was born in 1879 and died in 1876 when Winterling was only six years old. An encounter at a conference with Beatriz Colomina, editor of Sexuality and Space, and with other second wave feminist design history readings, further inspired Winterling’s exploration.

Gray had reacted against the formulaic nature of Modernist architecture, seeing in it ‘the atrophy of sensuality’ and arguing ‘Formulas are nothing, life is everything. And

---

22 Badetz, Yves Janette Laverriere 2005, Norma Editions, p. 149.
life is simultaneously mind and heart’. She, also, wished to find a way to mediate between interior and exterior spaces (which she saw as gendered) and in E1027, a house in the south of France and her piece de resistance, she used, in the words of another feminist architectural historian, Caroline Constant, ‘the notion of the experienced body….to transcend the reductive nature of the total view.’

In the light of these understandings, Winterling saw the Neue Nationalgalerie as so “obviously is in opposition to Eileen Gray’s ideas…that I didn’t feel I had to open up a dialogue, I just wanted to put the microphone to Mies and then Eileen.” For her piece, Eileen Gray: The Jewel and Troubled Water, she occupied the two identical and symmetrically placed cloakrooms among the very few elements that are allowed to break Mies’s universal space and displacing their usual contents – coats and bags - onto sculptures in the main hall. Her thought was “why not see these two as the lungs.” She installed various elements (film, photographs, architectural model) that are exactly replicated, in each of the cloakrooms: another example of duality of form which is repeated in the doubling of the portrait of Eileen Gray which Winterling hangs on the wall (Fig 8a).

In a layering of photographic imagery, that the artist has used in previous projects to explore memory and her relationship to women in the past, we see a reflection of double

---

25. seeing in it ‘the atrophy of sensuality’ Gray argued “Formulas are nothing, life is everything. And life is simultaneously mind and heart” [p.269 in CC. Quote from L’A Viv, winter 29, 19.]


27. Interview with the author, June 2008.

28. Eg 2007 A Matter of Time: Daughters of Casati. In 2008 she made another work (Isadora’s Scarf) responsive to another Modernist artist, the avant garde dancer Isadora Duncan, which also challenged Modernist rationality.
image of Winterling herself hovering, almost as if she were Gray’s ghost. The element you are most immediately aware of as you enter either of the cloakrooms, is the projection of a film of the condensation, forming and reforming on the glass wall of the building (Fig 8b): the mark of the ‘failure’ of Mies’s formulaic approach but which might be seen as an enrichment of the building. With jewel like beauty, the slowly changing image has a mesmerising effect on the viewer, held in the thrumming sound of the projector. If the two spaces give lungs to Mies’ building, the projectors are like the two ventricles of the heart, constantly beating.

A narrative that also flows through and motivates the work, is the shocking story of Le Corbusier’s obsession with E1027. He built a Cabane above from which to spy on the house, was to die in the sea swimming below it and conducted what Gray’s first biographer describes as a ‘rape’ when, with out permission, he painted murals on the walls, totally disrupting the carefully calibrated spatial and colour relationships.

Colomina had written a powerful essay drawing out the obsessive and sexualised nature of the iconography and the act: the only naked picture we have of Le Corbusier (which he apparently proudly showed around) was of him painting this mural. Although Le Corbusier had initially praised Gray’s work, later he couldn’t get her name right in, or omitted it altogether from, published accounts of his murals (E1027 was just ‘a house at Cap Martin’) – an erasure that left Gray enraged and deeply hurt. Some architectural texts still wrongly attribute the house; to this day the advertised walk that passes it is called ‘Promenade Le Corbusier’, and the murals, damaged in the war and removed in 1977, have been reconstructed from photos – ‘the occupation continues’ as Colomina grimly points out.

Winterling responds to Le Corbusier’s effacement of Gray and her work in a disturbingly pessimistic, dark photograph of an almost indecipherable figure. But in another image, picturing Gray’s asymmetrical Nonconformist Chair, she brings back the particular contribution made by the designer. Idiosyncratic and responsive to individual

---

29 As is argued in the Biennial catalogue: Vissmann, Bettina and Mayer, Jurgen, 2008, ‘Perspiration or the New National Gallerie between Cold Fronts’ p.96-98.
need the chair stands as metonym for her architectural practice and is emblazoned with the words ‘ANGER Scorpio Rising’ There is Gray’s own anger (clearly reverberating in Winterling’s own response): Colomina’s essay opens by quoting Gray “Anger is perhaps the greatest inspiration….suddenly one is all of a piece”. But also, in one of those contrapuntal weaves to the male line of influence, it makes reference to Kenneth Anger, the gay film maker of the experimental film Scorpio Rises,— bringing into view Gray’s homosexual ‘otherness’ often obliterated from mainstream narratives, but which Colomina suggests informed Le Corbusier’s growing antagonism to her: a double resistance of her erasure.

*Eileen Gray: The Jewel and Troubled Water* draws attention to the damaging, gendered power relations of 20th century Modernism which Colomina and Winterling, in their conversational encounters and thinking of the trials of Zaha Hadid and others, were painfully aware are still operative today. However, placing Eileen Gray at the heart of a heartless building, bringing the challenge of a matrilineal line to the architectural syntax, Winterling provides a differently gendered genealogy and thus, in her own words “an affirmation for the future.”

‘Dancing’ her own territory

Paulina Olowska, on the other hand, did not engage directly with the Neue National Gallerie – rather she used it to stage a reincarnation of the work of Zofia Stryjenska (1891-1974) which she then re-staged, to glorious effect, in the very different space of the Schinkle Pavillon.

Between the two wars the Polish artist, Zofia Stryjenska (1891-1974), was highly acclaimed, working across genres as a painter, muralist, graphic artist, book illustrator, as well as designer of kilims, toys, posters, stage sets, and costumes. Her most high profile work was the commission to design and paint six large murals for the Polish Pavillon at the 1925 Expositions des Arts Decorativ et Industriel in Paris. She typifies the predicament of many women artists who fall between the ‘bold lines’ of established movements. Her vibrant, energetic, colourful work drew on Polish and pagan traditions but it was too idiosyncratic and inventive, lacked sufficient historical accuracy, for the folklorists, yet it was also too representational for the purist Modernist Unism movement
in Poland at the time, so she falls from both narratives. After World War II she refused to join the Communist regime’s Union of Polish Artists’ and “was systematically relegated to insignificance, her contribution to Polish art ignored.” After the fall of the wall Stryjenska’s diaries were published in Poland and Olowska wished to bring her to cultural visibility, for a wider audience, through a painted dialogue.

Olowska was born in Poland two years after Stryjenska’s death. An interest in a female creativity and a dialogue with past practitioners runs throughout her work, notably in 2004 when, among other things in the Kunstverein Braunschweig, she installed a kind of ‘salon des femmes’ of larger than life portraits of early 20th century women Modernists (Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perriand, Nina Hamnett) which, mounted on wheels, could be moved into different relationships with each other and the spectator. Her interest in mass culture and fashion, as well as in the utopian impulse of Modernism, had lead her to want to look beyond second wave feminist prescriptions and attracted her to the work of the Pop artist, Pauline Boty, (and thus our first encounter). Similarly she was drawn to Stryjenska’s interplay of fine and applied art practices, her enjoyment of fashion and the decorative, which Olowska feels has left Stryjenska under regarded within feminist art history as much as by the mainstream. In an oeuvre that cuts across gendered genres Olowska was excited to find a confusion of gender “a new kind of sexualization …that allows for a mingling of sexual power”. In the Biennial catalogue, she has chosen passages of Stryjenska’s dairy to translate into English which express the artist’s acute, thrilled awareness of the onslaught of modernity but also the very real tension between her responsibility as a mother and her desire to commit to her career – the latter issue still very much a concern for contemporary women artists.

For the Neue Nationalgalerie Olowska re-created a number of Stryjenska’s works in monochrome, making selections and playing with scale, bringing all the figures to life size so they relate directly to the embodied experience of the viewer. (Fig 9) The removal of the colour that was so important in the original work, is a mark of Olowska’s

---

32 At 2004
33 Interview with the author, June 2008.
34 She had used the same strategy with the Boty painting in which a media image of Boty was hugely enlarged to life size, facilitating a dialogue with a current audience (see Tate 2008, p.191 and p. 199-200).
respect and focuses attention on the line, the dynamism of composition. Importantly, it asks the viewer for an effort of interpretation: she remembers a tutor reminiscing about the interactive, imaginative engagement required when only black and white reproduction were available for study.

Fig 9a. Stryjenska Mural for Paris Exposition, 1925
Fig 9b. Olowska Zofia Stryjenska 2008.

Olowska struggled with the scale of a building that does not relate to the human body and thought of displaying her work in the canteen. But this was not possible and so she used the outer walls of one of the cloakrooms where the scale and rectilinearity of the pieces echo and relate to the grid formations of the building: a bold reinsertion of this maverick woman artist in the spaces of Modernism. (Fig 10).

Fig 10 Paulina Olowska: Zofia Stryjenska in the Neue Nationalgalerie 2008
A portrait of Stryjenska opens the series of paintings: part of Olowska’s ongoing dialogue, often through portraits, with women artists of earlier periods. She is pictured wearing a blouse with abstract patterns which, Olowska felt, “gave the sense that she really belonged to the world she was creating” and a sad expression “because her life bears a lot of sadness.”

When I saw the work in the Neue Nationalgalerie, I felt as if Olowska were working as a medium (as in a séance) through which this ‘lost’ artist could speak (but greyly) – a kind of self abdication and at the time Paulina used the word ‘responsibility’ – a sense of responsibility towards Stryjenska. The work certainly holds its own in the dominating space of the gallery, but one feels distanced from it – the railings of the stairwell literally forcing one to stand back. However, what is so very striking is the profound difference between the work as seen in the Mies’s high Modernist building and the installation at the Schinkel Pavillon for the artist curated show that closed the Biennial (Fig 11).

![Fig 11 Zofia Stryjenska at the Schinkel Pavillon 2008](image)

Here Olowska used the floor patterns from Stryjenska’s design for the 1925 exposition, again in grey scale, exploding from the centre of the room. She took her paintings from the Neue Nationalgalerie and hung them from the ceiling, interleaving with them original paintings and poster designs by Stryjenska and vitrines with ceramics, postcards and designs: Stryjenska and Olowska were interwoven, layered together. The

---


36 In a manner reminiscent of the hanging panels that Mies van de Rohe had designed for the Neue Nationalgalerie.
viewer walked between, behind, through the works, in direct physical relationship with painted figures, an energising, embodied experience, which the photograph does little to convey. The whole space seemed to dance and gyrate bringing to mind Irigaray’s account (in *Sexes and Genealogies*) of the gestures girl children use to cope with maternal absence – one of which (unlike little Han’s *fort da* game, recounted by Freud) is the dance

she dances, and thus forms a subjective space open to the cosmic maternal world…This dance is also a way to create for herself a territory of her own in relation to her mother…in a way the daughter has her mother under her skin…The girl tries to reproduce around and within her an energetic circular movement that protects her from abandonment, attack, depression, loss of self.37

Speaking with Olowska again the day after the Schinkle opening, she laughingly wanted to withdraw the term ‘responsibility’ as too earnest, speaking instead (and on behalf of Baghramian and Winterling) of

*a creative dialogue, that combines our own personal experience and practice with the idea of having another artist as a metaphor for our struggles now, its not an homage because it is not nostalgic, more active and radical, the idea of a companion that shares our experiences.*38

**Conclusion : a ‘motivated history’**

Baghramian, Olowska and Winterling use their work to explore the depth of the spaces lying outside the bold lines drawn by dominant cultural history and, weaving a pattern of woman to woman genealogies, they reveal counter currents in the modernist experiment ‘in, of and from the feminine’. In the contrapuntal riff conducted by collaborators Baghramian and Laverriere; in Winterling’s anger fuelled occupation, with Eileen Gray, of Mies’s iconic building; in Olowska’s interlaced ‘dance’ with Stryjenska; in the very making of the work, its gestures and practices, the syntax of doubled images and forms that negate the singularity of the Phallic and structures and iconography that deny the binary opposition of interior/exterior; in the physical presence of the work, directly encountered by an embodied, contemporary audience, they ‘make’ history in and for the present.

37 Irigaray *Sexes and Genealogies* p.97-8
38 Interview with the author, May 2008.
Furthermore, this grouping of work is not isolated but can be seen as part of a constellation of practice that brings a ‘matrilineal line’ into the mainstream spaces of contemporary art. To cite just three further examples: Goshka Macuga at the Berlin Biennial and in her Turner prize show at the Tate in London (2008) responding to the design work of Lilly Reich – Meis van der Rohe’s usually overlooked partner; Lucy Skaer, short listed for this year’s Turner Prize (2009), making work inspired by her encounter with the surrealist Leonora Cannington; Ursula Mayer’s *Fur/Le Dejeurner en Furrure 2008*, exhibited in the newly refurbished and reopened Whitechapel Gallery in 2009, imaginatively voicing the reveries of three female figures of the Modernist past, Dora Maar, Meret Oppenheim and Josephine Baker. This pattern of work suggests a wider historical significance: a point in time when a female heredity in the arts and in theoretical understandings, now discursively available and potent, is being accessed.

In a historical perspective I see this practice as both made in and reaching beyond the literal and metaphorical spaces created by second wave feminist theory and activism. Although informed by its knowledges, and unafraid of the ‘feminist’ tag, the artists I have focussed on, have, perhaps, an ambiguous relationship with the second wave (not necessarily at ease with the ‘heroic’ tale it tells itself of itself) and have chosen to build genealogies that connect with earlier ‘inscriptions in the feminine.’ In doing so they open up and re-vitalise the vista of a ‘long’ history of feminism, within which the second wave can be seen to be a significant but not defining moment – a perspective that, avoiding the historicization of feminism as a late 20th century phenomenon, allows for the unfolding of as yet unknown future developments.

The work eschews polemical rhetoric but, as Hilary Robinson argues (drawing on Irigaray) ‘achieving an appropriate subjectivity for women…is a point of political and
cultural struggle’. In establishing woman-to-woman genealogies and in developing a visual syntax that might be seen as appropriate to the feminine I present the work as ‘political’ and hope my written encounter with it, framing it as a ‘motivated history’, will contribute to an ongoing and productive cross generational debate. As Griselda Pollock has put it recently

the vitality of a feminist analysis in art and culture [is] in its doubled movement as historical retrospect and a constant projection of feminism as a poeisis to come, a becoming, for which we have in the last thirty years barely made a start.\(^{45}\)

\(^{44}\) Robinson, op cit p152.

\(^{45}\) Pollock, 2008, p.277.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
Badetz, Yves Janette Laverriere 2005, Norma Editions.
Colomina, Beatriz
Faludi, Susan, 1992 Backlash, the undeclared war against women, Chatto and Windus
Grosz, Elizabeth, 1989, Sexual Subversions, Allen and Unwin
Irigaray, Luce
- 1991 “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas” in The Irigaray Reader ed Whitford, M. Blackwell Publishers,
- 1993 Sexes and Genealogies, Columbia University Press
- 2004 Luce Irigary Key Writings, Continuum, London and New York.
McRobbie, Angela, 2009, the aftermath of feminism Sage.
Olowska Paulina and Tate Sue 2005, "Gender & Genius," Swingset, Issue 7, pp. 42-46
Pollock, Griselda
- 1995 ‘Inscriptions in the Feminine’ in Inside the Visible MIT Press
Tate, Sue,