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The Invisible Flâneuse?: Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris

Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough eds.

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Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, Professors of Art History at Binghamton University, have edited and contributed to a compilation of essays titled *The Invisible Flâneuse?: Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. In their introduction, D'Souza and McDonough describe the text as an effort to re-examine and reconfigure the model for understanding women's experience of public space during the nineteenth century, and in effect offer a more complex interpretation of modernity in art history (1). They also tell the reader that the essays will take into account what has been written about the *flâneur* and will question his presumed dominance, and the ideology that such a figure has brought forth.

The *flâneur* has an established presence within the annals of art history, and his relationship to the modern painter is founded in Baudelaire's essay *The Painter of Modern Life*. The *flâneur* was a bourgeois man of French society, able to wander through the streets of the newly renovated Paris experiencing the sights and sounds of modern life that surrounded him, while still maintaining a distance from that which he observed. D'Souza and McDonough note that this construction of the *flâneur* as the paradigmatic figure of modernity, most capable of experiencing the urban environment of Paris, ignores the place of women and makes them invisible participants. Furthermore, the association of the *flâneur* as the modern painter denies agency to women artists, such as Cassatt and Morisot. The role of the *flâneur* has become increasingly contentious as critical theorists question who has been left out of this conceptualization of modernity, especially since the answer has most often been the *flâneuse*. The contributors to this volume further complicate the supposed dominance and absence of these figures through the ideas offered in their writings.

The collection opens with Janet Wolff's essay, "Gender and the Haunting of Cities (Or, the Retirement of the *Flâneur*)." Wolff's piece works well within the volume as she reconsiders her earlier essay, "The Invisible *Flâneuse*," which offered insights that contributed to the editors' interest in formulating the current volume. Although Wolff re-examines her earlier

assertions in-depth, she comes to the same conclusion: the *flâneur* is necessarily gendered male, a situation that results in the marginalization of women within public spaces during the early twentieth-century.

. . . I want to insist that the role of *flâneuse* remained impossible despite the expansion of women's public activities, and despite the newer activities of shopping and cinema-going. For central to the definition of the *flâneur* are both the aimlessness of the strolling, and the *reflectiveness* of the gaze (21).

Rather than insist on finding a place for the *flâneuse*, Wolff moves on to question the privileging of the *flâneur* as the "prototype" of the modern man. In a surprising shift within the essay, she calls for an exploration of "women's (and men's) actual lives in the modern city" (24-5).

She then examines the phenomenological experience of urban space and acknowledges its complexity outside of a strictly theoretical framework, which allows for a more nuanced approach to considering the role of men and women in the public and private spaces of the modern city. Ultimately, she avers that public has been privileged over private, thus explaining the predominance of the *flâneur*. However, viewing "the city," "the public" and "the private" with the same lens she has used to reconsider the *flâneur* allows for an effective re-balancing of the relationship between "the public" and "the private" (28). She disallows "the public" to define "the private" as being its opposite, and notes the instability of these shifting categories as they are used to describe "the city" which she views as a constructed space.

Greg Thomas's essay, "Women in Public: the Display of Femininity in the Parks of Paris," is a useful companion to Wolff's article; he points out the ambiguity and complexity of *flânerie* and the *flâneur* as a preface to considering the presence of women in public. He focuses on parks as public spaces because they were considered, after Haussmannization, to be "shining emblems of modernization" (36). He cites Manet's *Concert in the Tuileries* (1862) and Cassatt's *Woman and Child Driving* (1881) as prime examples of images that portray women as equally self-possessed public figures and that "represent women as competing equally with men for domination and definition of public space" (46). Thomas's essay aligns well with the project D'Souza and McDonough set forth in the introduction as he reappraises well-known images and introduces alternative perspectives for viewing them.

Manet's *Tuileries* is further interrogated by Marni Kessler who describes the veil (worn by various women in the painting) as a tool used to limit women's experience of urban life and modernity. "For the veil that was ostensibly a means of protecting the face from the filth of the construction also controlled how women experienced the city" (49). Kessler claims that veils were deemed necessary for bourgeois women because bourgeois men needed a way to assuage the anxieties that arose as they witnessed women of different classes mingling in the urban environment. Her essay provides a unique interpretation of the "actual" purpose of the veils worn in France during the nineteenth century. Additionally, her discussion regarding dust and those who needed to be protected from its potentially adverse effects (bourgeois women) is worth noting.

In an interesting parallel, Ting Chang's essay explains that the *flâneur's* experience of the city was limited, and his dominance challenged, when he ventured away from Paris, especially to the Orient. Chang defines the figure of the *flâneur* by labeling him a connoisseur, "a skillful observer who dominates the spaces through which he moves with poise and detachment," a definition that aligns with that proffered and questioned in the previous writings (65). Chang argues that the *flâneur* was unable to sustain his "poise and detachment" when confronted with an unknown, non-Western environment. She supports her argument through analyses of the trips to Japan made by Théodore Duret and Henri Cernushi in 1871, and Emile Guimet and Félix Régamey in 1877.

Chang argues that collecting objects was a means for Duret and Cernushi to purchase the elusive Japan, a Japan that they had hoped to encounter as unfamiliar, but in fact found to be all too familiar. Once they obtained the elusive and disorienting Japan through the items they collected, they continued collecting as a way to regain control (p. 68). The idea of collecting, Chang offers, is one of frenzied buying, a concept undoubtedly in contrast to that of the poised and detached *flâneur*.

A departure from the academic point of view is offered in the chapter that follow Chang's essay. Simon Leung, a contemporary artist and teacher at the University of California-Irvine, contributes a script that accompanied a performance piece done during 1991-2. This inclusion is aptly explained in the introduction: "[It] allows us to better understand the potentially multiple uses of public space as well as the fragility of that space as a normative category in bourgeois society" (14). His piece complicates the space of the public restroom. He forces the audience to become aware of the use of these restrooms as "tearooms" or sites for anonymous, male, homosexual encounters. The public restroom is destabilized as a public space in which private acts take place, and the very public nature of the space contributes to the private pleasures (81). Although Leung's work deals with contemporary life, his treatment of gender and public space is useful for the nineteenth-century art historian. However, including this piece within the volume creates a lack of focus because Leung deals not with public space of the nineteenth century, but rather the late twentieth century. Ultimately, McDonough's brief preface to the performance transcript offers the only insight into how to understand the nineteenth-century *flâneur* through Leung's contemporary practice.

Directly succeeding Leung's work is an essay that attempts to demonstrate that illustrated weekly papers mimicked the metropolitan experience of the *flâneur* (95). Tom Gretton challenges the presumed presence of the *flâneur* that the other contributors have established, claiming that "from say 1860 to say 1910 . . . the figure of the *flâneur* seems to lie fallow" (94). He explains the popularity of the illustrated weekly paper through a comparison between its layout, the experience of reading such a paper, and the persona of the *flâneur*. According to Gretton, the absence of the *flâneur* is compensated for through the publication and reading of various illustrated weekly papers. His argument is that the illustrated weekly mimicked the metropolitan experience; thus, while reading, one was enacting the role of the *flâneur* who wanders through the city as a reader wanders through the pages of the paper. Supposedly those who printed the weeklies felt that their mapping of urban space onto an illustrated newspaper format allowed for everyone to have an identical experience of the city, including women.

Wolff's contentions resurface in Ruth Iskin's essay, which investigates the patent visibility of the *flâneuse* in advertising images. According to Iskin, the *flâneuse* was able to gain admittance to urban space, and Iskin locates her power within the posters that illustrate women who are able to enter the urban environment to purchase items for their homes, themselves and their families. Relaxed social restrictions, which allowed women to go out alone or in the company of another woman "without compromising their respectability," also provided an opportunity for women's *flânerie* (122).

Whereas Iskin finishes on a positive note about the potential for women's *flânerie* that comes from the freedom to shop and move about the city, D'Souza counters by offering an answer to "Why the Impressionists Never Painted the Department Store." Degas' images of millinery shops evidence the Impressionist tendency to represent small boutiques rather than the *grands magasins*. The department store was a conflicted space for the containment of women, which produced anxieties in the hearts of bourgeois men who saw the potential safety such spaces offered, but also the possibility for a corruption of these safe environments at the hands of unsavory characters. While department stores considered men and women in their designs, they also provided an atmosphere that segregated them through the organization of merchandise. D'Souza comes to the startling conclusion that the (male) Impressionists stayed away from portraying the department store because they realized that it was a space in which separation of spheres was revealed to be a "sham," a place where boundaries "were consistently and insistently transgressed" (143). Although men and women's clothing may have been located on separate floors, there was no guarantee that interactions between these different spheres would not occur. Perhaps Impressionists just considered the department store uninteresting as subject matter. Furthermore, there is no explanation of why women Impressionists would feel a need to shy away from representing these spaces. In fact, such representations, according to D'Souza's reasoning, would have offered the empowering opportunity to reveal the fallacy behind the separation of spheres.

The transgression of boundaries is taken up by McDonough in his essay, "City of Strangers." McDonough examines the unsettling confrontations between men in the streets of Paris, late at night. The unknown passer-by on the urban street inspires fear because his identity cannot be located, and therefore must be surmised. Bourgeois men imagined the working class as perpetrators of crimes, an idea that stemmed from their anxiety regarding "the unreadable crowd taking shape on the street" (161). An inability to identify who might be an aggressor and who was just another citizen mirrored the growing inability to determine class based solely on appearances. McDonough questions the *flâneur's* dominance; his safety was at risk if he continued to wander aimlessly throughout the city.

Helen Scalway, an artist and Research Associate in the Department of Cultural Geography at Royal Holloway College, London University, brings the collection to a close. Transporting the *flâneuse* into the twenty-first century, she offers her own experience of walking in London as an example to illustrate the continued impossibility of women's *flânerie*. Women cannot be without purpose as they walk through the city, and Scalway struggles as she tries to find a space of belonging or a symbol of identification within London. Her writing offers a personal perspective on the difficulty of definitively declaring the presence or absence of a *flâneuse*.

Final thoughts on and insights into the various essays are made in Linda Nochlin's Afterword. Nochlin weaves together several prominent themes of the text, effectively linking the complexities of the modern Paris with the continuing uncertainty of contemporary existence. Public monuments by women artists (Rachel Whiteread, Jenny Holtzer and Maya Lin) evidence her argument that women have a long history of "engagement and relationship to public space" that is very different from men (177). In offering her own ideas, while maintaining links to the essays that have preceded her, she competently concludes the text.

The varied essays clearly examine a wide array of topics and they are all well informed and researched, but concerns arise in determining whether or not the text fulfills the goals and completes the project set forth in the introduction. Inconsistencies between opinions and ideas within a collection of essays are acceptable, but in this case they leave the reader confused as to what conclusions to draw. While the effort to include contemporary points of view is admirable, Leung's performance transcript and Scalway's writing are not well placed within the nineteenth-century Parisian focus of the volume. Nonetheless, the new perspectives on the *flâneuse*, *flâneur*, gender, and the city, and their varied dialogues within the visual culture of nineteenth-century Paris provide pertinent frameworks for re-thinking images, and not just for the feminist art historian.

Although each essay provides its own conclusions, a conversation develops between them and creates a space for the reader to ask questions. Is the department store a possible space for *flânerie*? Is the increased freedom to move about in the street as a consumer of material objects really creating a space for women's *flânerie*? Is the *flâneur* disoriented, disappointed or fascinated by the Orient? What type of evidence do the examined images actually offer? What is the relationship between the theoretical and the "actual"? All constructive questions for the art historian of the nineteenth century, and undoubtedly questioning is an invaluable process for any scholar.

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