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book review of

Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain, 1850-1900 by Deborah Cherry

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Deborah Cherry

Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain, 1850–1900

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Deborah Cherry's volume embraces provocative subjects for the scholar and student of feminist visual culture. It is one of several recent texts to challenge the Franco-centrism of modernism, and to acknowledge, document, and celebrate the role of the visual in modern Britain.^[1] Cherry's focusing metaphor consists of looking "beyond the frame" of normative reference for art history, feminist, and cultural studies. Referring to Derrida's "reflections on framing as a field of force," she notes that he draws "attention to a violent closure which subjects the work of art and its meanings to the pressures of restraint and regulation" (p. 5). With this organizing principle in mind, Cherry opens and closes her study with arguments for important feminist markers, specifically ephemera such as suffragette banners that helped make visible militant women who strove beyond such "restraint and regulation." She explores "painting alongside sculpture, graphic and decorative art, photographs and reprographic prints, illustrated magazines and the pageantry of demonstration" (p. 1) to achieve her goals of acknowledging the visible intersection of women, art, and politics in an urban/imperial environment.

Chapter one, "Artists and Militants, 1850–66," invites us to move beyond our current understanding of how women artists lived and worked in London at mid century. It provides a broad framework for the activities of these women in the modern city, not only as professional working women, but also as networkers and voices for the women's movement. In this respect, she applies a Foucaultian theoretical agenda of "the tactics of the habitat," which acts as a power base for women who coincidentally were artists and activists (p. 24). She helps, as have other new studies, to break down current constructions of femininity in relation to women's mobility during the Victorian period.^[2] Representations of women are impossible to interpret without an understanding of the shifting political scene. Cherry argues convincingly that feminism itself "provided frames for viewing and interpreting" (p. 2). For instance, in discussing the 1859 petition to the Royal Academy to admit female students, she speaks of the imposition of the doorframe as a synecdoche of opportunity; it at once prevents a woman from entering, but it is the only means available to gain important career advances. Her concept of always pushing "beyond the frame" is literally embodied in a drawing from the *International Art Notes* journal, entitled, "*The door to success is always labeled PUSH*" of 1900 (British Library, London; fig. 1.1). Appropriately chosen as the opening illustration for the book, it depicts two women dressed in suffragette garb—long skirts and long, tailored jackets—advancing through a door, artistic portfolios tucked under their arms.

Cherry makes us look anew at the streets of London, in particular, Gower Street, which included such noteworthy landmarks of feminist debate as the house of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the studios of Rebecca Solomon and Emily Mary Osborn, or nearby Bedford Square, home of Bedford College for Women. In one sense, in one frame, we can move beyond our image of the angel in the house. Cherry, like Lynda Nead, pushes through the

barriers—that is, the accepted constructions—of women's traditional spheres of influence to demonstrate their mobility and physicality in the city. In another sense, however, as Griselda Pollock has shown, the dialogue of modernity took place in the domestic arena as much as it did in the streets.^[3]

The next two chapters, which focus on issues of race, gender, and imperialism in Algeria, reveal the troubling truth that only middle-class women were involved in both the feminist and imperial projects. In chapter two, "In/Between the Colonial Theatre: Visuality, Visibility, and Modernity," and chapter three, "The 'Worlding' of Algeria," Cherry frankly addresses her own ambivalence about these feminists who "shuttle" back and forth between London and Algeria (p. 62). She explores the role of the female militant in the "colonial theatre"—an inquiry that again moves these women physically and figuratively beyond their standard frames of reference but at the same time does not, for, in exploring the militant response to the plight of "native women," these women in fact speak with an "imperial voice" (pp. 70–71). Cherry recognizes the hubris in their cause: "Slipping in/between registers of meaning, destabilizing and displacing those already in play, sisterhood offered an understanding of race relations founded less on equality and more on moral authority" (p. 72). Such destabilization/reinforcement (the "in/between" of her title, again suggesting a framing device) also exists in Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's landscape paintings of Algeria. The artist cannot escape the accepted Claudian "framing" of the pictorial landscape, even in exploring the "other" (p. 98) in such works as *Roman Aqueduct near Cherchel, Ancient Julia Caesarea* of the 1860s (fig. 3.8).

Chapter four, "Harriet Hosmer's *Zenobia*: A Question of Authority," exemplifies the methodological assertion by many interdisciplinary scholars that a work of art creates its own dialogue and multiple meanings even after it leaves the artist's hands. As Cherry explains, "Recent feminist analysis has emphasized that authority does not reside in the person but that it is conferred by social and political structures and authorised by discursive fields" (p. 102). This is especially true of Hosmer's *Zenobia* once it was exhibited at the 1862 London International Exhibition. Cherry discusses the issues of race, gender, and class that surrounded its appearance. Hosmer's sculpture broke every norm of neoclassical sculpture: it was made by a woman, it represented a woman of color in white marble (!), it was a visible marker of a queen on display for public consumption when England's own queen had vanished into mourning, and it represented a queen in chains. This last feature allows Cherry to extend her analysis beyond the immediate moment in London, to debates over the Civil War in America and slavery. She concludes, "*Zenobia* negotiated the sexual politics of vision, images of slavery, criminality and street women, the invisibility of Queen Victoria, a crisis in the British monarchy, women's rights, and women's art" (p. 141).

Chapter five provides the closing parenthesis, complementing chapter one as it explores the "Tactics and Allegories" of feminism between 1866 and 1900. Here the author focuses on the tensions between the female artist's political stance on women's rights and her individual professional success. Cherry discusses how, toward the end of the century, the modern city no longer offered a productive space for artistic feminist agendas. At this time, portraits by women of important female figures became increasingly important, as they negotiated a man's world through new professional guises. This investigation circles back to Cherry's observations in chapter one where she considers the ambivalent nature of feminist art

criticism. Writing for periodicals like *The Englishwoman's Journal* were women who fought, from 1850 on, for better artistic training and education for women so that their art could compete with that of their male counterparts. As Cherry explains, "The double bind was that if there was 'no sex in art,' there was sexual difference in society. Arguing that women's art should attain and be assessed by generally accepted critical standards and not be assigned to a separate category, feminist writers nevertheless realized that women artists faced considerable inequality" (p. 51). Cherry argues that articles on women's biographies succeeded more so than the criticism, since these were able to encode "hard work, financial independence and professional success...as feminine and feminist" (p. 55). In this final chapter, Cherry leaves the discussion of portraits open-ended, partly because the women themselves were in a transitional state. As the author states, "Without democratic rights, nineteenth-century women were engaged in... bitter struggles ...fought out at the level of visual culture as well as in political and social arenas," which leaves the portraits, at best, as "hybrids"(p. 188). Her scholarship itself does not offer us easy, box-like frames, but pushes the boundaries of interpretation.

Frames are limiting, but they invite challenge and provoke questioning. In this regard, Cherry fittingly ends with a discussion of the allegorical applications of the suffragist banner. She argues, "It was outside the institutions of culture and scholarship that women's art was at its most declamatory. Beyond the frame of high culture and on the streets of major cities, performative spectacle embodied women's demands for political representation" (p. 212).

In her book, Deborah Cherry embraces new approaches to art history through dialogues about space, imperialism, the politics of geography, mapping, and movement. Lynda Nead's recent observation applies to Cherry's achievement: "The best historians of nineteenth-century art have drawn (broadly, but discriminatingly) on diverse areas of the humanities and social sciences in order to produce rich and nuanced analyses of the cultural production and consumption of the period."^[4]

Colleen Denney
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Notes

[1] See, for example, Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry, eds., *English Art 1860–1914: Modern Artists and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[2] See, for example, Lynn Walker, in "Vistas of Pleasure: Women Consumers of Urban Space in the West End of London 1850–1900," in Clarissa Campbell Orr, ed., *Women in the Victorian Art World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 70–85, whose mapping of women in London Cherry draws upon. For a provocative discussion of the *flâneur/flâneuse* question, see Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[3] On these debates about women's ability to move in and through urban spaces, see Janet Wolff, "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity," in *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 34–50; Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 50–90; and Nead 2000.

[4] "[Whither the Field of Nineteenth-Century Art History? Commentaries by Annette Blaugrund, Werner Busch, Henri Dorra, Lynda Nead, and Linda Nochlin.](#)" *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 1, no. 1 (www.19thc-artworldwide.org, Spring 2002), p. 7. Retrieved on 1 March 2002.