



## GRISELDA POLLOCK

### I Personal Statement about Research 2025 II Reflections on Research Practice

#### I PERSONAL STATEMENT ABOUT RESEARCH 2025

I have drawn from and, I hope, contributed to the major theoretical revolution of the later 20<sup>th</sup> and current century: *Feminist Theory*, which ranges across all disciplines from physics to music and has drawn theoretical insights as much from literary, cinematic and visual artistic practices as from philosophy, history, anthropology or poetics.

As an art historian, cultural analyst and feminist thinker, my research is, therefore, **transdisciplinary, self-challenging** and **critical**. My research and writing do not fall *inside* one discipline. Art or film are not made within boundaries even as they respect the habits, procedures and traditions of their chosen arenas of practice. My resources for their analysis are, of necessity, transdisciplinary and comparative.

My research and writing have, of necessity, become increasingly transdisciplinary, theoretically enriched, shaped by, internally questioned by and contributing to feminist, postcolonial and queer theory, deeply rooted in apparently contradictory systems of thought: historical materialism and psychoanalysis of many different forms. The **social relations of production** and the **psychic formations of subjectivity** operate on distinct registers but intersect as they play out across cultural forms and practices that are based in materialist conditions and actively produce subjective positions in a very complex and dialectical interaction. These need to be constantly questioned from positions of exclusion, difference and agonistic struggle.

I refuse the concept of **Theory** as a lumpen, alien import into the field of Art History and the study of artistic practices and thought. One key area of my research has been, therefore, art historiography and the study of methodologies.

I remain invested in the social and historical analysis of the making, exhibiting, assessing and reading works of the visual arts, cinema, photography, music, and of literature the museum and the exhibition as form.

My writing and researching are theoretically enriched, conceptually-driven and focus on questions such as **‘what is art doing?’** and **‘what resources and critical tools do we need to begin to analyse and situate historically, culturally and critically what art (in its specific forms and practices) is doing in the complex social-economic and ideological formations in which it works—and has been used and consumed?’**

My analytical practice is **concept-led**. My aim is to analyse how artworks *work* ( in the semiotic, ideological and psychoanalytical modes) and how we might read what Bracha L Ettinger terms ‘artworking’ (Ettinger 2000) As a dedicated feminist thinker and researcher, I have worked to create **concepts** for *‘feminist interventions in art’s histories’*

These have included:

vision and difference	1988
generations and geographies	1996
avant-garde gambits	1993
differencing the canon	1999
the virtual feminist museum	2007
after-affects/after-images	2013
trauma and aesthetic transformation	2013

The majority of my books offer **close readings** of specific artworks or projects framed by my invention of concepts for transdisciplinary, theoretically enriched cultural analysis. Yet, I also clearly remain invested in the social and historical analysis of the making, exhibiting, assessing and reading works of the visual arts, cinema, photography, music, and of literature, the museum and the exhibition as form.

I situate social, critical, feminist, postcolonial histories of art as a product and the continuing project of both the **long history of the women’s movements** reaching back to the medieval period and more recent forms of class struggle, decolonizing liberation movements, and movements for the rights of all sexualities.

I have written very few **monographic** studies of single artists or bodies of work (Mary Cassatt, Charlotte Salomon, Jean François Millet, Vincent van Gogh, Bracha L Ettinger).

The majority of my books are focussed studies of specific artworks or projects by means of transdisciplinary, theoretically enriched cultural analysis. The case of Charlotte Salomon who created one single, but multipart artwork before her murder in Auschwitz in 1943, titled *Leben? oder Theater? [Life? Or Theatre?]*, presents a striking example of the challenge of studying an artwork by an art historically ‘nameless artist’: an artist, who never exhibited work, and whose name was not yet inscribed into Art History and was further obscured by its own author signing the work CS. I wanted to title my book *The Nameless Artist* but then, where would it be catalogued or placed on a bookshop shelf both of which order art history by names?

I have had the honour to be solicited and commissioned to write about many **modern and contemporary artists:**

Chantal Akerman Alice Anderson Martina Attille Bobby Baker Yael Bartana Marie Bashkirtseff Nicky Bird Sutapa Biswas Maria Blanchard Louise Bourgeois Claude Cahun Liliana Cavani Hsiang-Chun Chen Sonia Delaunay Tracey Emin Bracha L Ettinger Helen Frankenthaler Vera Frenkel Sheila Gaffney Isa Genzken Eva Hesse Kerry (Filer) Harker Mona Hatoum Lynn Hershman Leeson Susan Hiller Lubaina Himid Alexa Hunter Claudette Johnson Mary Kelly Lee Krasner Yayoi Kusama Lynn Hershman Leeson Joanne Leonard Anna Maria Maiolino Lily Markiewicz Agnes Martin Jo McGonigal Tracey Moffat Laura Mulvey Georgia O’Keeffe

Susan Philipsz Adrian Piper Penny Siopis Nancy Spero Alina Szapocnikow Mitra Tabrizian  
Christine Taylor Patten Judith Tucker, Hannah Villiger Monika Weiss Coral Woodbury

Collections of my writings include:

*Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* 1996 (single- and co-authored texts)

*Looking Back to the Future: Essays on art, life and death* 2000

My writing and research has involved a **faithful critique of the discipline of Art History** as I was inducted into it in 1970 that has been followed by the joyous, if slow, discovery of rich resources within its expanded histories, finding not only feminist predecessors such as Helen Rosenau but also offering a feminist intervention into the delayed reception of and interest in the legacies of Aby Warburg's thesis on the *pathos formula* and art as transmission of cultural and affective memory. This has also led to the exploration of occluded histories of women as art historians culminating in the republication and analysis of the work of Helen Rosenau (2024)

Since 2000, my research has also focussed on the legacies of what French political deportee and camp survivor David Rousset termed in 1945 ***the concentrationary universe*** in conjunction with the separate development of Holocaust and trauma studies. This has produced four co-edited volumes with Max Silverman.

*Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance*

Berghahn 2011

*Concentrationary Memories: Totalitarian Terror and Cultural Resistance*

Bloomsbury 2013

*Concentrationary Imaginaries: Tracing Totalitarian Violence in Popular Culture*

Bloomsbury 2015

*Concentrationary Art*

Berghahn 2019.

**As a research leader**, I have been part of several research centres at the University of Leeds.

Centre for Cultural Studies 1987 -

Centre for Jewish Studies 1995-

I founded and directed the Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History  
(CentreCATH) in 2001-2021.

In 1991, I created a dedicated the only MA and PhD programme in

### **Feminism and the Visual Arts**

that was an equal pathway for theoretical and art practical students. Its core modules were:

I Feminism and Culture: Theoretical Perspectives

II Femininity/Modernity/Representation: Rethinking the Twentieth Century with  
Women in Mind

III Feminist Criticism and Practice in the Contemporary Visual Arts)

IV A Dissertation or an Exhibition with short dissertation

The MA was summarily abolished in 2002, although PhD students continued to come to Leeds for feminist studies since some modules continued to be taught and research supervision was offered.

### **The main areas of my research and writing have been:**

- i) the visual arts and their feminist, social-historical, queer, postcolonial histories
- ii) the many forms of cultural practice that intersect with, draw from or challenge the visual arts, including cinema, advertisement, popular culture.
- iii) the formation and questioning of Art History as a discipline and modes of thought
- iv) a social and critical cultural analysis of art and culture and their complex histories.
- v) expansion of methodologies, practices and challenges in creating and entangling feminist, social-historical, queer, international, postcolonial/decolonizing histories of art
- vi) analysing the rise of the curatorial and the role of the exhibition in contemporary art
- vii) Trauma and Holocaust Studies in the visual arts, literature, film and museology

My research and writing do not fall *inside* one discipline. Art or film are not made within boundaries even as they respect the habits, procedures and traditions of their chosen arenas of practice. My resources for their analysis are, of necessity, transdisciplinary and comparative.

As part of the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities Oral History of Art History Project I was interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith in 1997. The result of three days of interview is titled *The Ambivalence of Pleasure* and offers an insight into the political and theoretical context for my work in Britain since the 1970s and for the methodologies that we developed individually and in collectives and reading groups.

<https://archive.org/details/ambivalenceofple00poll/page/n7/mode/2up>

**Current book projects include:**

Monroe's Movies/ Monroe's Moves: A cultural Analysis of Nation, Class and Gender

Creating 'Van Gogh': A History of A Cultural Politics

Heretical Writings: A Social Historical Analysis of Vincent van Gogh's Programme for Modern Art

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## II REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH PRACTICE

**Where does our impulse to research begin?**

**Why do some of us enjoy it?**

**What are the questions we need to pose, and which questions need new forms of analysis to answer?**

A Freudian answer would situate both the drive to know and its pleasures in the foundations of our psychic life where curiosity and anxiety are interwoven. There is also another kind of pleasure in making sense of things by trying to understand the world and even its complexities and opacities. As I look back to the point at which I began to be **required** to do research for academic purposes initially as an undergraduate and then a postgraduate student, and thereafter as a professional academic scholar, historian, art historian and finally as a transdisciplinary cultural analyst, for over 50 years, I can trace three important impulses. I loved finding things out. I delighted in finding how things worked. I enjoyed being intellectually challenged by the complexity of the making of art and of the social and historical conditions in which it had been or was being made and then circulated as both a representation and a project for 'knowing otherwise'.

From European classical, medieval and modern European and American history during my undergraduate degree, in 1969-1970 I shifted into to the study of Western art in the 19<sup>th</sup> and then 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and since then the contemporary. I had discovered art history as a field through fellow undergraduate Frances Carey and then by taking an option in my final year *Baudelaire and the Artists of His Time* taught by Professor Francis Haskell. This led me to the Courtauld Institute of Art for my MA where I became a Modernist with a side-study of Romanticism. Fred Orton, then a PhD student, took our seminar on Van Gogh, following his co-curation of the recent exhibition of Van Gogh at the Hayward Gallery in 1969 that I had visited. Only later did I connect this with the fact that the first exhibition I recall visiting was in Toronto in 1960. Both exhibitions impressed me with horror as the journey through the works led me from darkness and the earth to sunshine and the abundance before the horrific encounter with the artist's early death. Fred Orton did not allow us to accept with this legend. He asked us to look closely at the work and ask ourselves: what am I seeing? What has the artist done? What materials? What effects? How have these been produced and to do what?

To challenge the legend, I wrote my MA Thesis on Van Gogh's evident relationship to, and difference from the Hague School of Dutch painters whose work alternated between images of the premodern countryside and the modernizing city. I then proceeded to receive a scholarship to undertake my PhD that slowly uncovered Van Gogh's profound involvement not just with his Dutch contemporaries (the topic of an exhibition I curated at the Van Gogh Museum in 1980) but, unexpectedly, with seventeenth century Dutch art, which was being reassessed and promoted as model for modern art by 19<sup>th</sup> century French critics and art historians. I created an index of my own for his letters to track the formation of his romantic conservative concept of an anti-modern modern art. When I completed the thesis, I could not find a publisher. Who wants to deconstruct such a profitable myth? It was only in 1990, at a symposium marking the centenary of his death, when I carefully traced a cultural history of the formation of the myth of Van Gogh that I came to realize that the first exhibition I saw, in Toronto in 1960, was part of a cluster of post-war exhibitions travelling in Europe and the United States that had launched a 'Van Gogh' for a Cold War political climate. This construction of and investment in 'Van Gogh' has been a major topic and resource for my analysis of Art History as a discourse grounded in social and cultural politics. Many articles have been written, lectures given, but the translation of my PhD into a major publication has yet to find its realization. (I do have new plans)

I was, however, distracted and entirely remade as an art historian by the emergence of the Women's Movement which set this already feminist (I had read Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan in my teens) but still-apprentice art historian, working to deconstruct the mythic concept of the solely masculine artist, with a new challenge to understand the complex work of women as artists and to transform/deconstruct Art History as a discourse, in order to make that possible. And more, I had analysed **how** and **why** the discipline of Art History, the academic and museum versions, had since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century systematically and ideologically worked to erase women artists' existence and contribution and to secure art history as a field of solely white, masculine creativity and hence creative intelligence and representations of the world. Why did this happen in the face of the revolution created by women in their targeted, but not exclusive revolt against patriarchy (the socio-economic cultural system) and phallocentrism (the symbolic order sustaining that system). The myth of the sacrificial male genius as the core figure of art is the counter image of the invisibilized artist as a woman, even as there is the mirror image of the male genius is the negative image of 'the feminine stereotype'—conceptually unoriginal, derivative in style, narcissistically trapped in their bodies—inflicted on artists who are women.

To be an art historian ca 1970 made being a thinking woman in the field a contradiction. So, the major commitments of my research for the next four decades have been focussed not on *recovering* women artists, relatively easily done for there they all were in the books and museums, if one only looked. What was needed was both critical examination of Art History as itself a phallocentric and patriarchal *discourse* creating a gendered hierarchy for art's histories, and critical and differencing participation in the creation of an expanded Social History of Art that itself had to be challenged, as well as deployed. My project became one of **Feminist Interventions in Art's Histories**. These histories are plural and always internally self-critical as we unpack and negotiate what feminist analysis names and makes more visible: an active production of patriarchal vision of the world. Feminist art history cannot be a mere permitted subset for women. It is neither a corrected nor a unified story. As a feminist, but also as historical materialist and a post structuralist, I intervene, deconstruct dominant ideologies and challenge my own blind spots. While I want to insist on the necessity for and creativity of a 'feminist' challenge, it is itself interrogated in the name of the complex intersecting systems of power, the plaited threads and entangled hierarchies called race, gender, sexuality, class and geopolitical situation and socio-economic histories particular to each of the latter. Who is speaking of whom from where? Generations and Geographies (1995) was a concept that then emerged to explore such questions. Equally *Differencing the Canon* was a necessary concept for critical re-reading and re-positioning the analysis

of what art works do and how our discourses produce hierarchies of meaning. Thus, my work is not 'feminist' counter story of art, but as historiographical as it is analytical.

The writer, any researcher, is situated, claimed by systems of power and deformed by abuses of power. Thus, the project becomes a continuous work, a struggle enriched by challenging encounters with artworks, artists, thinkers, situations, change.

This is more than a matter of different methodologies. So, I had to negotiate the difficult but profoundly important dialectic and triad of the social, critical, feminist, postcolonial and queered histories of art.

But that was not enough. I had to study outside the official mode of art history to understand authorship, gender, class, race, representation, ideology, formations of subjectivity, concepts of cultural memory. All of these orders of power and socialization had incited specific modes of analysis that could easily become guarded enclosures. Each of these great intellectual and political enterprises generated **concepts** with which we could analyse the systems and processes that enclosed us in the categories we term race, class, gender, sexuality, age, neurosensory norms. My books' titles trace a history of the formation of concepts for feminist interventions in art's histories and, in response to the brilliant work of Mieke Bal, cultural analysis. The latter is not object- or artist-based as is conventional Art History, but rigorous, theoretically informed, transdisciplinary 'reading' of what art, texts, discourses do, what they produce, and how. What they produce as practices is us: the subjects ( in the sense of agents) of these systems of representation.

This led transdisciplinary research that shared with emerging fields of film studies, cultural studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies and rigorous combination of theoretical tools and close reading, or close analysis of the operations and effects of images, texts, and institutions that produce and sustain asymmetrical hierarchies we loosely term 'difference.' The theoretically enriched, historically situated and conceptually enhanced project of cultural analysis emerged from the interweaving and cross-disciplinary projects that culminated in the founding of the Centre for Cultural, Analysis, Theory and History in 2001.

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