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“Can art history survive feminism?”

On the 1990 meeting of the College Art Association.

In February the Women’s Caucus for Art, a nationwide organization of feminist artists, critics, art historians, teachers, and arts administrators, convened its 1990 national conference at the New York Hilton. Appropriately titled “Shifting Power,” the well-attended three-day conference was held jointly with the annual meeting of the College Art Association, the most prominent academic organization of art historians in the country. It was, as everyone knew it would be, an event devoted primarily to politics, not art. Indeed, like many events now claiming the prestige and perquisites of art, “Shifting Power” was essentially a pep rally in the campaign to transform art and cultural life into an arena for political activism.

What the campaign itself signifies is nothing less than the subordination of all intellectual and artistic endeavor to a radical political agenda. Its goal, as the title of the conference made clear, is power. Under the banners of multiculturalism, feminism, and sundry other radical causes, the Women’s Caucus for Art seeks to impose upon both the study and the creation of art a rigid system of political tests that, if adopted, would effectively liquidate the very concept of art. In keeping with this political objective, the Caucus’s program of lectures, panel discussions, and “lunch and networking” sessions featured such topics as “Women of Color: The Art in Life and the Life in Art,” “Lesbian Artists: Reclaiming the Past, Defining the Present,” “Dangerous Transgressions: Showing Our Teeth,” and “Firing the Canon: Feminism, Art History and the Status of the Canonical.”

Anyone familiar with the tenor of cultural and academic life today will recognize that all this is simply business as usual. These and kindred other radical efforts at imposing social change in the name of art have in just a few years transformed themselves from peripheral irritations into a constellation of powerful new orthodoxies. Artistic achievement counts for nothing in these new orthodoxies, and intellectual probity is scarcely a memory. It is no longer possible to ask of any proposition or proposal “Is it true?” The governing question now is “Does it further our political goals?” To raise questions about artistic quality is to be out of order—and probably out of a job. The new orthodoxy demands that such questions be supplanted by political tests: “Are there enough women (blacks, homosexuals, Chicanos, etc.) represented?”

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one of this is any longer news, of course. But at these events it always turns out that, things are worse than you think. This :was vividly illustrated by the

conference's keynote address, "Can Art History Survive Feminism?" The address was delivered by Griselda Pollock, a professor of art history at the University of Leeds and a well-known purveyor of academic Marxist arcana. Although her talk was little more than a congeries of clichés about "patriarchal" society, the depredations of capitalism, and the allegedly sexist nature of modernism, Professor Pollock's performance reminded us that the extreme edge of acceptable discourse in

"The commodity of capital"; "hegemonic discourse"; "Eurocentric"; "analysis of colonial discourse"; "class power, race power, heterosexualist power" —it all came trippingly off Professor Pollock's tongue like feminist-deconstructionist ticker tape. In one particularly telling phrase, she described her intellectual project, the project of radical feminism, as the "dissolution of all existing formations of knowledge." It was not clear what new forms of knowledge she proposed to replace the accumulated accomplishments of civilization with, only that her proposed destruction would begin with the discipline of art history. She even indulged in a bit of ritual self-criticism, apologizing to the audience for her own "privileged" status as a woman who is, as she put it,

A white, middle-class, and heterosexual. t the center of Professor Pollock's address was a discussion of *Manao tupapau* ("The Specter Watches Over Her"), one of Paul Gauguin's most beautiful Tahitian paintings. Professor Pollock spent most of her time abusing Gauguin for his attitude toward women and pondering the inner life of his thirteen-year-old model. For Professor Pollock, the painting existed primarily as a "space of economic and sexual exchange." She agonized over whether she—a white, middle-class heterosexual—was really qualified to discuss the painting in the radical terms she championed, and assured us that though the "specter," the other figure depicted in the painting, is black and of ambiguous gender, it must be thought of as a man and a white man at mat.

For Professor Pollock, Gauguin's painting provided both an inventory of its creator's malfeasance and—by the sort of bizarre leap of logic that only a Marxist academic seems capable of making—an indictment of white, middle-class European society *tout court*. Paul Gauguin was, to be sure, an unpleasant fellow: callous to his wife, treacherous to his friends and mistresses, unscrupulous in his business dealings. But what does any of this have to do with the artistic quality of the painting in question?

What was clear throughout Griselda Pollock's keynote address was that terms like "art" or "quality" have absolutely no meaning for this professor of art history. And it was clear, too, that her boast that she and T. J. Clark, the Marxist art historian and her former colleague at Leeds, were out "to get the establishment" was not an idle one. Professor Clark, at least, certainly succeeded in "getting" the establishment in another sense by securing first a well-paid appointment to a full professorship at Harvard and then going on to an even grander position at the University of California at Berkeley.

C an art history survive feminism? It won't if Professor Pollock and her sister radicals in the Women's Caucus for Art have their way. As Professor Pollock candidly proclaimed, feminism is an "intervention against art history." She was also candid about the only problems she envisioned with such an "intervention." If we ended art history, she asked, where would we get our Ph.D's? And without that precious certification, what would feminists do about jobs? What would they do about garnering power? About "getting" the establishment? After all, she explained, "We ultimately do it for the money." Thus the discipline of art history is to be transformed into a conduit for shifting money and power to feminists. And what about art? That was one subject about which Professor Pollock had nothing to say.

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