

Book Reviews

Terra Infirmis: Geography's Visual Culture. By Irit Rogoff. London: Routledge, 2000.

With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture. Edited by Lisa Bloom. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Patricia A. Morton, University of California, Riverside

I

I

Irit Rogoff's and Lisa Bloom's books serve as primers of what Donna Haraway calls "situated knowledge," as opposed to a distanced, universalist model of art-historical scholarship based on "a conquering gaze from nowhere."¹ Both books challenge the traditional model of art history that reads artworks either as transcendent or as a mirror reflecting the world and propose instead a set of contingent, local knowledges constructed in conversation among reader, artist, historian, critic, and work. They critique art history's universalizing conception of the art historian and the discipline's unreflexive tendency to locate its subjects and objects

in nationalist, masculinist, and racist discourse. Each volume takes the theme of the art historian's "eye" and his location in a detached, abstract space of criticism as a starting point for extended critiques of ways of looking, spectatorship, and the articulation of difference in visual culture.

The positioned spectatorship of the art historian forms a central theme in these volumes. With different emphases, they dissect the presumption that a stable location—within the discipline, within national and racial traditions, and within geographic and psychic boundaries—determines the art historian's access to truth and the meaning of the artwork. The art historian is just one of many potential readers, not the privileged holder of the discerning eye who is elegantly critiqued in Bloom's introduction.

¹ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 188.

Permission to reprint a book review printed in this section may be obtained only from the author(s).

Far from taking themselves out of the picture, Bloom and her contributors and Rogoff make their subject positions part of their scholarly projects and foreground the degree to which their own gender, training, upbringing, employment, national affiliations, and marginalized status inform their work. Displacement problematizes Rogoff's and Bloom's "natural" allegiances.

Rogoff writes as a former member of the Israeli intelligentsia who has herself undergone several displacements to the United States, Britain, and Germany. In the introduction to her edited collection, Bloom describes herself as a U.S.-trained Jewish feminist scholar who teaches visual culture in an interdisciplinary women's studies program in Japan.

Terra Infirma traces Rogoff's journey through postwar geographic shifts and changes in contemporary art and discourse over the last twenty years. Much of the work she discusses is characterized by spatial and epistemological displacement. The sense of "unbelonging" (5), of inhabiting "unhomed geographies" (4) rather than the easy dwelling within national, racial, ethnic, and class identities, dominates her book.

Geography,

in Rogoff's account, is a form of "positioned spectatorship" (11) as defined by feminists Haraway, Teresa de Lauretis, and Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak. It is a site for interrogating "belonging" and is "only partly a metaphor" for Rogoff, since she is concerned with the meaning of both material and metaphorical space in contemporary art practices and in critical

theoretical activity (14-20). In her account, the links between visibility and identity and visibility and location are played out in geography in ways that go beyond the traditional borders of art history, art criticism, or the visual arts as categories. Visual representations establish the realm

of the known and, according to Rogoff, geography and spatialization participate in the generation of the unselfconscious Western belief in exteriority,

faith in an ability to define the unknown, and presumptions of unmediated positionality. As Rogoff notes, "geography as an epistemic category is in turn grounded in issues of positionality, in questions of who

has the power and authority to name, of who has the power and authority to subsume others into its hegemonic identity (as France subsumes North African identities, Israel subsumes Palestinian identities, Anglo-American ideology in the USA has until recently subsumed ethnic minority identities etc.)" (21).

Rogoff problematizes geography as a transparent body and order of

knowledge and endeavors to unname, rename, and revise its power structures in terms of the relations between subjects and places. She does so by examining contemporary art practices in relation to space and spatialization.

Her first chapter, "Subjects/Places/Spaces," is a historical homage to the critical texts that have informed her work over the past

S I G N S Spring 2006 • 873

two decades, including feminist work on theory and epistemology; theories of space and spatialization from those of Michel Foucault to those of Henri Lefebvre; new geographic models by Derek Gregory, David Hooson, Neil Smith, and Rosalyn Deutsche; and theories of spectatorship and vision. In four subsequent chapters she reads the sign systems of luggage, mapping, borders, and bodies as rewritten and renegotiated by contemporary artists. These case studies in geographic signifying processes and practices chart a broad array of phenomena from the art and nonart worlds, including museum exhibitions, performances, installations, and more traditional art forms. For example, the chapter on luggage ranges from the Ellis Island exhibit on immigration to the "Suitcase Studies" project by architects and architectural theorists Ricardo Scofidio and Elizabeth

Diller to Alfredo Jaar's "Geography p
War" installation, all signifying

"the 'degree zero' of displacement both temporally and spatially" (36). Rogoff delineates the cultural politics that emerge from each work and spins a complex, global tale of the conjunction of deterritorialized subjects with the theorization of deterritorialized epistemologies.

Bloom's edited volume *With Other Eyes* aspires to push art history in directions mapped by feminist cultural studies and postcolonial theory, areas that art history had neglected at the time of the volume's publication.

Bloom writes that this anthology "continues a discussion that is occurring both inside and outside of the field of art history regarding a feminist visual culture and how it can develop new paradigms of social criticism that do not rely on either the traditional underpinnings of the discipline nor on unitary notions of 'woman'" (1-2). She notes that art history has recently begun to reexamine mainstream ways of looking as well as spectatorship

itself, a task made difficult by the continued valorization of the notion of the trained eye of the art historian. Referring to Laura Mulvey's and John Berger's classic conceptualizations of the gaze as a priori male, Bloom asserts that the look and the viewing process are "incontrovertibly masculinist" and steeped in gender and racial and ethnic difference (2).

Her project poses new ways of viewing and reading artworks and art historical scholarship that foreground questions of power, difference, and sexuality. Like Rogoff, Bloom insists on the need to situate knowledge and to challenge art history's claim to determine "what may be considered legitimate and reliable knowledge and what may be marginalized" (4). She is critical, however, of feminist revisionism and of the monocultural and assimilationist assumptions of postmodernism and feminism in which ideologies of race, sexuality, and class are complicit with constructions of gender, and she calls for a feminism that accounts for globalization and the historical differences of women.

874 • Book Reviews

Bloom divides the anthology into two sections: part 1, "Gender, Race, and Nation: Histories and Discourses," and part 2, "Contemporary Visual Discourses: Postnational Aesthetics." The first part is a "genealogy of modern art history" and its intersection with racism and sexism (13). This section includes Bloom's study of the New York school of art criticism, Inderpal Grewal's analysis of spectatorship at the British Museum, Francette Pachteau's psychoanalytic reading of white femininity and beauty, and Shawn Michelle Smith's interpretation of photographs of African Americans. The second part incorporates less conventionally academic essays and several collaborations among authors, such as the article on autobiographical work by southern California women artists, collectively written by Aida Mancillas, Ruth Wallen, and Marguerite Waller. As a whole, the essays provide valuable case studies that complicate gender-, ethnic-, and race-based notions of location and nation.

Bloom and her contributors and Rogoff recontextualize and reinterpret masculinist discourse by assuming the role of a reader of artworks rather than that of an authoritative or authoritarian art historian. The intersections of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality are not disentangled in this work but rather are made explicit and central. Rather than creating another universalizing narrative of art and history, their work situates knowledge and meaning in the local, in the discursive, and in subject positions, or in all three. This is not a revisionist project, the simple addition of some token artists of color and women to the canon, but a reconceptualization of art history's means and methods. While these books were published six and seven years ago, they remain indispensable as synthetic, comprehensive

critiques of the epistemological and political bases of the discipline.

-