

Feminist Approaches in *Art History*: Considering the Periodical Archive

Victoria Horne

In May 1979, a year after the Association of Art Historians launched its journal *Art History*, the *Feminist Artists Newsletter* printed this rousing command:

I would like to stress again. This newsletter is NOT SPECTATOR SPORT. If I subscribe I must write too in it. The Women's Art Movement is doing it yourself. [...] WE are the Women's Art Movement. We are making our own art history. If we don't write it nobody will!

Stencilled and duplicated onto densely typed, pink A4 pages stapled together, this announcement boldly underscores the participatory ethic of feminist cultural production at that moment. Within the communication networks coalesced through various magazines, newsletters and journals, feminist-identified readers were cast not as neutral recipients but as active producers of knowledge. This grassroots, intellectual revolution was anticipated to transform art practice, history and theory, if not also society itself. The announcement's key message – to do it yourself – was one of outraged creativity and collective self-reliance in the face of a conservative discipline with inherited blind-spots concerning gendered identity formation, including art and art history's role in perpetuating this process. The idiosyncratic grammar and formatting of the newsletter's typed message indicates this conceptual revolt in its very structure.

In 1970s Britain, the renewal of collective feminist politics had coincided with an expansion in higher education and the concomitant development of curricula in the broadly conceived cultural field.² Extending from these historical circumstances were also the professionalizing impulses of the new subject association for art history, so it is logical that the effects of feminist scholarship could be felt in *Art History* from the very start.³ However, as Deborah Cherry in 1982 described it – chiming with the sentiment of the passage above – feminism's transformative intellectual project was 'not to add to art history as we know it, but to change it'.⁴ Given today's revived 'paper politics' of independent printmaking and zine production, and a thriving academic interest in art's publishing histories, it seems a useful time to revisit the feminist periodical archive and trace those transformations.⁵ In view of the technological and social distinctiveness of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century publishing contexts, I am interested especially in how we might conceptualize the set of material conditions that facilitated that radical break with the intellectual status quo. Adopting a media ecology mindset would account for the interwoven relationship of feminism's aesthetic

and conceptual advancements to the movement's media objects and networks: those newsletters, journals and books through which bold new ideas were transmitted.

Periodicals are epistemologically sticky; they give abstract social movements material form, and they cohere intellectual disciplines by providing loci for discussion and debate. Like subject associations, academic journals are disciplinary technologies that bestow authority, and provide bounded spaces for reflection and (sometimes discordant) collegiality. It is worth considering how scholars of the period mediated and placed their work in diverse contexts, to observe the formation of reader networks, and to trace how individual publications acquired certain (albeit changeable) themes or personalities. During the late 1970s the broader 'periodical landscape' of British art history appears particularly vibrant,⁶ and feminist ideas traversed this terrain: from 'homemade and humble' movement magazines, photocopied pamphlets and newsletters, to formal scholarly journals.⁷ In addition to the newsletter quoted above, feminist-influenced writing about women's art and culture could be read in the magazine *Spare Rib* (founded in 1972), the academic journals *m/i* (founded in 1978) and *Feminist Review* (founded in 1979), and from 1983 the long-running *Women Artists Slide Library Newsletter*. At this time, critically-reflective scholarly journals sprang up across the humanities, offering radical perspectives informed by gender, class, sexuality, race and subaltern studies in subjects including philosophy, history, geography and design.⁸ In addition to *Art History*, 1978 saw the launch of another comprehensive disciplinary forum in the *Oxford Art Journal*, as well as the short-lived but incendiary *Black Phoenix: Journal of Contemporary Art & Culture in the Third World*.⁹ Two years earlier the magazine *Art Monthly* had started its distribution in a country that was still publicly uncomfortable with much contemporary art.¹⁰ It was, in short, a lively time for serialized print publishing, and that library of periodicals served many complementary and contradictory ambitions: to provide forums for discipline-specific enquiry; to create platforms for political exchange; to disseminate information; or to facilitate exchanges within intellectual and activist communities. Periodicals are necessarily more immediate than most other publications and can provide a testing ground for new or developing ideas; studying these ephemeral publications therefore means studying an intellectual history in the very moment(s) of its production.

How do we tell the history of periodicals? And how might we represent the history of feminist ideas expressed within them? In looking back across the writing published in *Art History* and other forums, it remains vital to note the affective and material histories of feminism as well as its intellectual histories. How do we excavate those structures of feeling that arise from being part of a network, a member of an association or amongst a magazine's readership – what Lynda Nead has (in other contexts) evocatively described as researching 'the more fugitive and transient conditions of social life'?¹¹ It is my belief that in attending to such questions we would start embroidering richly and structurally feminist histories of this archival material. For as Melanie Waters and Victoria Bazin point out, magazines often challenge definitive versions of the past; the intricate weave of discordant voices and positions in periodical archives work to unsettle ossified or teleological narratives about feminism's development. They suggest, therefore, that: 'Interpreting the histories of feminism through periodicals is not simply a form of archival excavation; it challenges the way in which we tell stories about feminist activism.'¹² Periodicals are neither tidy nor linear; as readers we dip in and out of them; voices may clash to reveal uneven versions of the past; and they are also never really complete, often simply running out of either steam or funding. Their seriality means that such publications are in constant flux, with each new issue supplanting the previous one. This future-oriented impulse is held in

tension with the periodical's archival function (its arrest of a moment in time), and this precise temporality, born of ephemerality, is deeply imbricated in the publication form.

I would like to share an anecdote. At the start of my PhD in 2010, I wanted to investigate to what extent, and in which shape, feminist-informed debates about art were visible on the pages of *Art History*. I duly visited the small subject library in the University of Edinburgh's Minto House where I spent days searching through bound issues of the journal, pulling those heavy volumes down from shelves one at a time. Later, I travelled to the Archive of Art and Design in London's Blythe House to sift through uncatalogued letters, meeting minutes and conference programmes. It was an exciting time, right at the beginning of my postgraduate research, and these actions conformed to the image of historical research that I had in my head: they felt like 'real' scholarship. It has been a privilege to revisit the archives of *Art History* for this virtual issue. I have been reintroduced to those early discussions that made Victorian formations of gender their major analytic focus, seen more vividly how anti-colonial ideas have been built into the feminist project throughout, and learned much about the writing of art history beyond my own modern/contemporary focus. What has struck me most starkly is the diversity of objects, themes, language and ambitions that could be gathered under the umbrella of 'feminist approaches'. If it is primarily the insistence on gender production and relations as the dominant factor in art-historical analysis, the force of feminism is evident in the prevalence of such investigations. It is refreshing, as *Art History* proceeds through its fifth decade of publishing, to trace a decolonial feminist standpoint rooted firmly at its core.

Yet writing in Summer/Autumn 2020 in the midst of pandemic-related restrictions, unable to visit the library or access my university office, this reading has looked and felt very different from that which I undertook a decade ago. *Art History's* archive is now fully digitized, so I was able to click through my university library site from home, to search and download PDFs which I printed out and read as discrete texts rather than part of a larger collection. This was due in part to the confounding intricacies of university library e-access – the multiple gateways and passwords – through which I had to navigate. My electronic access made viewing the journal cover images very tricky (since the beginning of 2004 the journal has reproduced an artwork on each cover), and it was difficult to locate the editorials or – perhaps most significantly – to read the articles relationally to the material around them.¹³ It was almost impossible without holding the journal in my hands to grasp or map the conversations (conscious or unintended) taking place across the pages of individual issues.

Periodicals scholars Sean Latham and Robert Scholes suggested in 2006 that rapidly expanding digitization projects threaten a 'hole in the archive' by dropping paratextual details such as back matter, editorials, letters, and stripping advertising from the digital version. In their view, 'we have often been too quick to see magazines merely as containers of discrete bits of information rather than autonomous objects of study'.¹⁴ Over these past months digital access has been a lifeline, but it has also, for me, underscored the altered material basis of both the discipline (art history) and politics (feminism). I am not a romantic; I know it is extraordinary to have this information, available and searchable, at our fingertips. There is also little point wistfully mischaracterizing print-based research that can be a slog through irrelevant materials. However, I agree firmly with Samuel Bibby's assessment that a journal's intellectual history is bound up with its existence as a material object, and that we ignore the sensual details of publishing at the impoverishment of this history.¹⁵ How then might

feminist interventions in art history have differed without the active, participatory periodical cultures of both the women's movement and the new humanities? If that intellectual transformation of art and its history was, in part, engendered by active readerships and periodical communities, how might we imagine analogous critical interventions taking shape against a transformed publishing landscape in the present? These observations might seem self-evident, but experiencing the peculiarities of delving into this rich archive with ten years' separation brought into focus the evolving textures of historiographical research, leading me to consider how the political and intellectual work of feminism is changed (or not) by the transition to digital platforms. Writing recently about typography in the *LRB*, Alice Spawls notes:

The danger with computerisation is that, as the designer Bran de Does points out, "too much harmony is counterproductive in long-term reading, old-fashioned reading". You need something to grip onto, something other than the smooth and perfect contrast of a liquid crystal screen. The typeface helps, as does the texture of paper, the richness of ink.¹⁶

This in turn reminded me of Roland Barthes's 1973 essay, *The Pleasure of the Text*, in which he celebrates the 'abrasions' readers sometimes impose upon the fine surface of a text.¹⁷ Abrasive reading evokes the agency of the reader when dipping in and out, skipping and drifting or focussing. (Barthes reminds us also that pleasure can arise from disrespecting the boundaries of texts, of pushing at and reimagining the edges of a discourse's structure.) The word is strikingly tactile; it contains within it the suggestion of leaving marks or folding corners, of touch and grip and texture. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's landmark anthology *Framing Feminism* (1987) emphasized these textures of knowledge by reproducing articles, cuttings and letters with the original creases, markings and smudged ink, 'to give a concrete representation of the time, space, intentions and constraints that initially determined the texts. The facsimile form allows us to discern in residual form the living movement of history.'¹⁸ Those reproduced pages of pamphlets, magazines and newsletters captured something of the feeling of the women's art movement, an affect-saturated history, the material conditions of social life, beyond the discrete texts and images of artworks.

In our digital age, contemporary artists have demonstrated a firm fascination with bookish objects and print knowledge; galleries have frequently been transformed into libraries, and audiences to reader-researchers.¹⁹ Artists have creatively excavated print archives and, by foregrounding the historian's handling of a document, or the paratextual traces of bodies observable in smudged inky prints or coffee-stained paper, have suggested how feminist memory is bound up and mediated through such material traces. In 2006, for instance, Kajsa Dahlberg gathered every copy of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* from Sweden's public libraries and duplicated their pages to produce a palimpsest of scribbles, circles, underlinings and notes.²⁰ Rehoused in a pristine, white-bound volume, 121 riotously-marked pages fizz with energy, emphasizing the haptic qualities of the text: a palpable chronicle of its handling as distinct from its immaterial place in the cultural canon. The artwork's emphasis on the material conditions of intellectual labour (of reading and writing, and 'thinking back through our mothers') is suitably analogous to those explored in Woolf's famous essay.²¹ Methodologically similar, in the elegiac *165 Stars, Found in GWL Lending Library* (2012), artist Shauna McMullan scoured Glasgow Women's Library to collate the stars and asterisks marooned in the margins of donated and circulated books, reproducing those marks against a powdery blue background.²² Detached from their original context these

asterisks become generic signifiers of the print reading experience, rather than traces of a specific reader upon a specific book; while appropriated from the library books of a feminist grassroots enterprise, these marks indicate the stratified and cumulative reading memory of GWL's audience.²³

A final example exploring print-based intimacies and knowledge is instructive here: Sharon Hayes's *In My Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You* (2016) is a five-channel video installation projected into makeshift plywood hoarding that is evocatively papered on the reverse with posters, printouts and flyers. Thirteen performers read a script that stitches together excerpts from correspondence pages of underground newsletters and magazines, published for a coterie of queer and/or feminist readers in the mid-twentieth century. Excavated from archives, the chorus of voices generates a vibrant impression of the paper public that enabled isolated women to connect, correspond and puncture one another's solitude through readerly exchange. Carolyn Steedman has suggested that satisfying research might be thought of in terms of 'untying and undoings', of opening notebooks and private accounts and peering in, to read history's 'unintended, purloined letter'.²⁴ Like Steedman, Hayes frames the historical researcher as a desiring reader of traces from the past. Her filmed performers voice another's words torn from the depths of a paper archive as a means of momentarily inhabiting, disentangling, and learning from what came before. Reading thus enables sensual connections across space and time. This is not, however, mere nostalgia; although 2021's feminist project is riddled with discontinuities and sharp edges (fractured across aspirational neoliberal feminisms and black abolitionist thought, gender critical and trans-feminisms), the film's periodical research shows that belief in a halcyon solidarity of the past is only ever a fantasy.

It is no coincidence that during this current period of isolation and global uncertainty, social media platforms and online art activities have been awash with zine-making, printing and collaging workshops, while mail art and pen-pal exchanges have surged in popularity.²⁵ This testifies to the reassuringly sensual nature of such practices, emphasizing the desire for material connections in socially distanced times, a tangible thread from one isolated body to another. But it also demonstrates, I hope, why these reflections on the material histories of art-historical research might be valuable in spotlighting the way we connect, correspond, and think together as part of an intellectual community. I gather these observations to suggest that it is worth investigating further the role played by periodicals in feminism's comprehensive transformation of art history, of its objects, materials, language and methods of enquiry. Moreover, such a focus on serialized, dispersed, processual knowledge exchange emphasizes networked collaboration, thereby extending feminism's significant critique of the lone scholar model.

As the organ of the UK's disciplinary association, *Art History* created a set of conditions (conditions that were of course abraded and negotiated) for a specific, especially public, and influential articulation of the feminist intellectual project. I hope that the selection of articles that comprise this virtual issue gives a suitably diverse view of feminism's effects in this specific context. There was no science to my selection, but I tried to ensure a fairly even spread in terms of time, and to choose essays that showcase distinctive approaches, for example biographical recovery, gendering of historiography, dress and self-fashioning. I included one artist interview, which is notable for both its uncommon format and for inserting the rarely heard voices of this journal's Irish neighbours. In terms of media, included writings address moving-image, painting, installation, and performance, the diversity of which demonstrates feminism's comprehensive analytical reach. I have left out more widely

reproduced articles because I assume these are already well-known, and where two or more articles overlap in subject matter or approach, I have simply chosen one.²⁶ A whole other issue could be dedicated to the excellently provocative book reviews, which I have not included here. As well as a logical focus on women's art practice, the main theme to recur throughout is the represented female body as a site at which deep psychic, national, cultural, and historical anxieties about race, gender, and class converge, and are negotiated. Although each article deserves analysis, I will not summarize the content and methods here, but leave the reader to reach her own conclusions.

Someone else would have made a different selection. However, my hope is that the articles presented here provide a pleasurable and expansive view of feminist effects upon the art-historical landscape in the UK over the past four decades – and, in their diversity, provide a decisive sense of how entrenched that alteration of perspective has been. The 'periodical landscape' of 2021 is changed substantially from 1978, as are broader conditions; art-historical research is increasingly foreclosed by marketization and a managerial ethos, by deepening austerity and the yet-to-be-experienced repercussions of the COVID pandemic. However, many of the ambitions and desires of politically committed researchers have remained constant. If 'we are making our own art history', it is still vital to ask what that does and could look like. Academic journals play a role in shaping careers and debates, influencing disciplinary enquiry, and establishing (shifting) epistemic limits, making it vital to consider and weigh the institutional apparatus of journals themselves. Those liberational calls to change art history, not to settle with additions but to compel transformations, serve as powerful reminders that the discipline, like our academic institutions, does not exist beyond us; we constitute them in our actions, our research, our publishing and reading.

Victoria Horne is a Senior Lecturer in Art and Design History at Northumbria University in Newcastle. She is currently working on the book 'If we don't write it nobody will!': Feminist Art Periodicals in Britain, 1970-2000, which has received the support of a 2021 Paul Mellon Centre Mid-Career Fellowship.

Notes

- 1 Kate Walker, 'Communications Network', *Feminist Artists Newsletter*, 4, May 1979, n.p. The *Women Artists Newsletter* began at the Tenth National Women's Liberation Conference in Birmingham in April 1978, working through a few names before relaunching as the magazine *Feminist Arts News*, which was published quarterly until 1993.
- 2 Eve Worth has written on the importance of higher education for women's social mobility in the 1970s: 'Women, Education and Social Mobility in Britain during the Long 1970s', *Cultural and Social History*, 16: 1, 2019, 67-83.
- 3 Lisa Tickner's article 'The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists Since 1970' (*Art History*, 1: 2, June 1978, 236-251) was due to be published in the first issue, although notoriously it was delayed to the subsequent one due to disagreements among the editorial board. I have written about feminist scholarship published in the journal between 1978 and 1990 in: "Our project is not to add to art history as we know it, but to change it": The Establishment of the Association of Art Historians and the Emergence of Feminist Interventions, 1974-1990', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 18, June 2018; <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/horne.pdf>.
- 4 Deborah Cherry, 'Feminist Interventions: Feminist Imperatives' [review of Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses*], *Art History*, 5: 4, December 1982, 507.
- 5 Josh MacPhee uses this phrase in *Paper Politics: Socially Engaged Printmaking Today*, Oakland, CA, 2009.
- 6 I have borrowed this useful term 'periodical landscape' which stresses panoramic relationality between a network of publications from Samuel Bibby. New studies such as Bibby's are valuably considering how the flourishing periodical landscape of 1970s and 1980s Britain facilitated a revolution in the so-called 'new' art-historical perspectives. See "The Pursuit of Understanding": Art History and the Periodical Landscape of Late-1970s Britain', *Art History*, 40: 4, September 2017, 808-837.
- 7 This phrase is borrowed from periodicals scholar Laurel Forster's *Magazine Movements: Women's Culture, Feminisms and Media Form*, London, 2015, 209.
- 8 For example: *Radical Philosophy* (est. 1972); *Race and Class* (est. 1956, but renamed in 1974); *History Workshop Journal* (est. 1976); and *BLOCK* (est. 1979).
- 9 *Black Phoenix* would be reignited by Rasheed Araeen as *Third Text* in 1989, and the long-running success of that venture suggests it was ahead of its time in the late 1970s.
- 10 Robert B. Semple, 'Tate Gallery Buys Pile of Bricks – Or Is It Art?', *New York Times*, 20 February 1976.
- 11 Lynda Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke: Art and Culture in Post-War Britain*, New Haven and London, 2017, 6.
- 12 Victoria Bazin and Melanie Waters, 'Mediated and Mediating Feminisms: Periodical Culture from Suffrage to the Second Wave', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 27: 4, 2017, 347-358.
- 13 I should stress that although the *Art History* team have reproduced these details online it is just the complicated route through my library website that made it so difficult to access them.
- 14 Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, 'The Rise of Periodical Studies', *PMLA*, 121: 2, March 2006, 517-518.

- 15 Nicholas Thoborn also reminds us that: 'The material forms and qualities of writing and publishing have long remained marginal'; '[yet] it is now more commonly recognised that an exclusive focus on semantic content is an inadequate means of grasping the full meanings and effects of a text'; *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*, Minneapolis, 2016, 3-4.
- 16 Alice Spawls, 'At the Type Archive', *London Review of Books*, 2 July 2020; <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n13/alice-spawls/at-the-type-archive>.
- 17 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, New York, 1973, 11-13.
- 18 Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement, 1970-85*, London, xvi. Recent publications have extended this facsimile approach, for example, Primary Information's *A Documentary HerStory of Women Artists in Revolution*, New York, 2021.
- 19 Indicatively, see: 'Speculative Libraries' convened by Nick Thurston at the AAH Annual Conference, Loughborough, 2017; and Clare Bishop, 'Information Overload', keynote lecture at the AAH Annual Conference, Brighton, 2019.
- 20 <http://kajsadahlberg.com/work/a-room-of-ones-own-a-thousand-libraries/>.
- 21 This suggestion is famously made in *A Room of One's Own*; for more on this theme, see Lisa Tickner's 'Mediating Generation' (2002) in this virtual issue.
- 22 <https://collections.womenslibrary.org.uk/museum/museum-object/974002/>.
- 23 At the time of writing, public library access has been restricted for months. Libraries, as Susan Orlean reminds us in her wonderful history of the Los Angeles central lending institution, are one of the few public spaces remaining: 'The publicness of the public library is an increasingly rare commodity. It becomes harder all the time to think of places that welcome everyone and don't charge any money for that warm embrace.' Susan Orlean, *The Library Book*, London, 2019, 67. This 'commitment to inclusion' is also observable in museums and art galleries, which might partly explain why so many visual arts spaces have hosted makeshift libraries or publishing ventures in recent years.
- 24 Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, Manchester, 2002, 71-72.
- 25 Rachel Syme of *The New Yorker*, for example, launched #penpalooza on Twitter, and during the past year has connected over 13,000 pen-pals.
- 26 For instance, Lisa Tickner's 'The Body Politic' (1978) which is reproduced widely, and Griselda Pollock's 'The Grace of Time: Narrativity, Sexuality and a Visual Encounter in the Virtual Feminist Museum' (2004) which was developed as a book in 2007.