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Amelia Jones

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Sex and the (art history) academy

Amelia Jones

- 1 Discussions about sexuality and gender have resurfaced with a vengeance in US culture with the recent debates about same-sex marriage and the rise in visibility of transgender subjects and themes in popular culture. Regarding the latter, most notable are the Amazon television show *Transparent*, featuring an older man who is transitioning and dealing with his children's bafflement, and the E! television show *I Am Cait* as well as the accompanying public interviews (in April, 2015 with Diane Sawyer on ABC television) and magazine articles (in July 2015 in *Vanity Fair*) documenting the transition of former Olympic athlete Bruce Jenner into "Caitlyn."¹ Major newspapers such as the *New York Times* have, in response to this popular culture rush to embrace transgender issues, published news articles, including a major front-page story on a trans-female judge, Phyllis Frye, who has been a trans activist since the 1970s.²
- 2 So what about the art world and academic art and art history discourses? How are debates and discussions about gender and sexuality informing (or not) art practices, theories, and curatorial strategies as well as the teaching of art history today? Since the 1970s, with the consolidation of cultural studies (particularly strongly in the United Kingdom) and the debates of the rights movements (especially in the US), feminism, gender studies, and queer theory have been central to the arts and humanities in US universities. By the 1980s most included some kind of "Women's Studies" department or program; the name of such programs were often changed in the 1990s to "Gender Studies" or some variant, due to the important developments in queer theory and Lesbian Gay Bi- Trans Queer (LGBTQ) discourses. However, these programs were largely driven by social sciences faculty from disciplines such as sociology or anthropology and rarely connected to the visual arts or art history. Feminists could be found here and there in US art history and art departments from the 1970s onward, however. Art historians focused on retrieving the work of gay and lesbian artists have had a presence in US departments to a limited degree. Queer theorists less so – in fact they have been almost entirely absent. Together with Erin Silver, a Canadian queer feminist art historian, I have just edited a book exploring why queer theory has had little impact in art history, entitled *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*.³

- 3 All the same, gender theory of one kind or another has become integrated into teaching and research relating to art and culture of all forms in universities, and debates about the representation of women or queer artists in art institutions are ongoing, thanks to dedicated feminist scholars and curators such as Maura Reilly, Katy Deepwell, and Hilary Robinson.⁴ Relating to this last point, theories of representation taught in art and art history programs are deeply indebted to the rigorous feminist critical theory of the 1970s through the 1990s, whether or not they explicitly address feminist and queer issues (texts such as Laura Mulvey's classic 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity are still commonly assigned in basic critical studies – art theory and history as taught in art schools in the US – and in art history classes).⁵
- 4 In spite of this foundational importance, the key political urgencies of feminist, queer, and gender theory have been largely sidelined in contemporary art discourses and practices (including curating). We are clearly beyond the heyday when feminism (the 1980s into the 1990s) and queer theory (the 1990s) stood out on their respective limbs to challenge the closures and oppressions of art discourse, art-institutional practice, and the disciplines in the humanities – although it must be said that neither of these discourses had the purchase in US art history departments and art schools that they did in the United Kingdom (feminist art history in particular) or in other humanities departments in the United States (queer theory has long been a strong force in departments open to cultural studies approaches).
- 5 While many of us queer feminist theorists working in art history departments or art schools still make arguments and base our research on structures of analysis relating to feminist and queer theory, there is little direct risk in doing so at this point. My recent book *Sexuality* (published in the Whitechapel Gallery's *Documents* series) is a case in point. This book includes material that was viewed as highly controversial at the time it was published – including texts and interviews by Cosey Fanni Tutti, Ron Athey, and Claudette Johnson; Yayoi Kusama's *Homosexual Wedding (Press Release)* from 1968, Orlan's *Carnal Manifesto* (c. 2000), and Lorraine O'Grady's *Olympia's Maid* (1992) – but I have now compiled such items for their historical importance for a study of sexuality and art.⁶ Arguably books such as *Sexuality* defuse the original political pointedness of these art practices and critiques by presenting a range of earlier views in condensed form.
- 6 At the same time, focusing on issues of gender and sexuality is still controversial in art-related discourses in the US. Insisting on applying an explicitly queer feminist approach to art history or to critical studies or visual culture studies will not advance a scholar's career in the same way that practicing traditional art history (focusing on reception, materials, form, or the object-status of art without questioning the structures through which these arguments are articulated) or teaching theory as a grab bag of approaches with no attention to historiographic and social concerns or identity politics will. In US art history departments, cultural studies have largely been repelled – the hugely influential group surrounding the journal *October* has been central to this exclusion, and their arguments have joined forces with those of conservatives who believe art history is a "neutral" discourse without method or point of view and hence not in need of an interrogation of the structures through which it operates.⁷ In art history, teaching and research methods remain structurally just as they were, more or less, in the mid to late twentieth century. The kinds of deep interrogation and reconfiguring called for by major scholars such as Donald Preziosi and by queer

feminist theorists in other disciplines such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have not been forwarded.⁸ In the art school, the grab bag approach to teaching theory is common. For example, teachers (who often have MFAs rather than PhDs and have not studied art history intensively) tend to include key theories from the past and of the moment with little attention to where, when, and why these theories were developed; it is rare to see critical studies courses in art schools explicitly address questions of power and theories of identity and identification – including feminist ones – with any consistency or force.

- 7 The contrast between the way histories and theories of literature, film, popular culture, and certain kinds of music and theater are being taught (often with a deep investment in cultural studies and their attention to politics and power in relation to how culture works) and the way visual arts histories and theories are being taught in art history departments and in art schools can be stark. At the University of Southern California (USC), for example, a number of cutting-edge scholars addressing queer feminist and anti-racist politics are clustered in the English and American Studies and Ethnicity departments as well as in the Cinema, Music, and Theatre/Drama schools. The art history department courses do not address contemporary feminist or queer theories to any extent. My presence at the Roski School of Art and Design has changed the curriculum at the School, but before I came, there was a general interest in social practice and political theory as it plays out in art criticism. Little attention was being paid, however, to the ways identifications condition how we make, display, curate, write about, and experience art in all of its forms. Feminism was implicit in some of the studio curriculum but not explicit in critical studies classes.
- 8 In sum, feminist and queer theory are embedded in much art theory, but not generally explicitly foregrounded in art schools and art history departments in the United States. If anything they are suppressed, ignored, or kept to the margins. There are exceptions, based of course on personnel and vision (Norma Broude and Mary Garrard have taught feminist art history for decades in the Department of Art at American University; University of California, Irvine's Claire Trevor School of the Arts has been groundbreaking in diversifying their faculty for decades, and this in turn has strengthened their curriculum and the attention paid to issues of power and identification in the visual arts world; at State University of New York, Buffalo, the pioneering queer art history scholar Jonathan Katz has spearheaded an innovative PhD program foregrounding queer and feminist art history and a lecture series on Gay and Lesbian Art). But no art history department in the United States foregrounds feminist art history, other than through the work of a few individuals here and there; curatorial studies and studio art programs tend to ignore or marginalize feminist and queer approaches.
- 9 While – as I argue in my book *Sexuality* – sex and sexuality, gender and gender identification are central to the making, interpretation, and display of art, these aspects of human experience are still viewed as marginal concerns to art discourse and the teaching of art and art history, particularly in North America. Even in the face of popular culture's move to embrace debates about sexuality and gender identification noted at the beginning of this article, the academy and the art world remain largely blind to the centrality of an understanding of these questions of identification to any comprehension of how art works in contemporary US society.

NOTES

1. The same-sex marriage debate culminated in the Supreme Court decision in the summer of 2015 basically making this a federal legal right. On celebrity transgender folks, see the cover story by Buzz Bissinger (with photos by Annie Leibovitz), "Call Me Caitlyn," in *Vanity Fair*, July 2015, 50-69, 105-6; the Diane Sawyer interview took place on ABC News' *20/20* show, April 24, 2015.
 2. See Deborah Sontag, "Once a Pariah, Now a Judge: The Early Transgender Journey of Phyllis Frye," in *New York Times*, August 29, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/us/transgender-judge-phyllis-fryes-early-transformative-journey.html?_r=0 (viewed on September 25, 2015).
 3. Amelia Jones, Erin Jones eds., *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, Manchester, 2015.
 4. See Maura Reilly's recent special issue of *Art News* on "Women in the Art World," June 2015; I contributed "On Sexism in the Art World," p. 69-70, www.artnews.com/2015/05/26/on-sexism-in-the-art-world/ (viewed on September 25, 2015); Katy Deepwell edits the important online feminist art journal *n.paradoxa: International Feminist Art Journal*, www.ktpress.co.uk (viewed on September 25, 2015); and Hilary Robinson is adding to her important publications bringing together texts in feminist art history with her forthcoming edited collection, *Companion to Feminist Art Practice and Theory*, Bristol, forthcoming. I contributed the essay "Essentialism, Feminism, and Art: Spaces where Woman 'Oozes Away'" to the latter volume.
 5. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Screen*, 16/3, 1975, p. 6-18, reprinted in Amelia Jones ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, New York/London, (2003) 2010, p. 57-65; and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York/London, 1990. The original argument was first published in Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Theatre Journal*, 40/4, December 1988, p. 519-531.
 6. Amelia Jones ed., *Sexuality*, London, 2014.
 7. See the infamous "Visual Culture Questionnaire" published by the journal *October*, which has long mounted a defense against new methods informed by identity politics concerns or cultural studies; Svetlana Alpers et al., "Visual Culture Questionnaire," in *October*, 77, Summer 1996, p. 25-70.
 8. See Donald Preziosi ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Oxford, 2006; Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven, 1991; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's oeuvre, especially *Tendencies*, Durham, 1993.
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