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Review

Seeing Differently
A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts

Soraya Murray

Since the emergence of identity politics in the 1970s, historians and critics of art have been forced to contend with its potent ramifications for their object of study. To what degree should identity and difference shape the value systems of art scholarship? In cases where an artist's subjectivity is directly reflected in the content of the work, as in so-called 'identity art', its role is clearer. But in works whose form is non-representative, or whose originator is conventionally understood to be normative, there is less consensus. To what degree can identity be brought to bear on meaning and interpretation? On a more foundational level for art scholarship, how does the ideological framing of aesthetics through a eurocentric logic of identity continually generate and uphold binary notions of normativity? In her newly published research, anti-racist and feminist art historian Amelia Jones deconstructs how such meanings and significance are ascribed to art, advancing a model that hijacks normative assumptions of identity implicit to visual culture – and ultimately queers them.

Seeing Differently unpacks the determinative, but under-examined ideological role of identity in Euro-American artistic movements and their historicisation since the 1960s. While identity certainly sustains significant critical and scholarly attention in contemporary art, this text theoretically unpacks the *formation* of the individual as a lynchpin construct of Euro-American modernity. Jones addresses continental philosophy by mapping a trajectory through René Descartes, Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Hegel that traces its deep ideological investment in artistic practice as inextricable from the modern subject (the individual), and filtered through a series of binary relations that reinforce the superiority of continental cultural production over that of ideologically constructed 'Others'.[1] A survey history of the notion of the individual unveils how art was configured as an 'inherently superior mode of human production' (2); as the exclusive expression of that autonomous subject; and as an extension of a binary model in which the Other is perpetually constructed as non-individual and incapable of such elevated expression (28).

In response to this rooted bias, Jones asserts the framing of a 'new model for understanding identification as a reciprocal, dynamic, and ongoing process that occurs among viewers, bodies, images, and other visual modes of the (re)presentation of subjects' (1). This model is significant because it begins to lay a theoretical groundwork by which it is possible to conceive of:

> . . . complex models of identification involving relationality, intersectionality, hybridity and affect in relation to queer, post-colonial, feminist concepts of subjectivity in a political framework to resist structural terms of a simplistic binary. (9)

That is to say, it suggests not a move away from identity, but a recognition that binary-based approaches to identity fail to provide an adequate critical language for contemporary production.

Jones describes her contribution as operating in relation to existing identity models, not replacing them (13). The text is solidly feminist, activist and kindred to the interventions by Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane that opened up radical new possibilities by contesting the very terms under which cultural production is discussed. Jones's critical project is lucidly set forth in the first and second chapters through a theoretical intervention into rational Cartesian perspective, one that challenges the normative subject and the knowable. Duration – the activation of bodies and

objects within space and time in art – forms one site of optimism in terms of outstripping the fixity of Cartesian logic, a key point to which she returns in later chapters.

Chapter Three focuses primarily on identity-based art of the 1970s and 1980s, with an emphasis on the problem of rigid binaries between self and other. During this pivotal time, theorisation of fetishisation dominated and, as Jones professes, the reversal of the fetishistic gaze constituted a primary strategy against the horror of being fixed by a paralysing objectification. In her analysis of works by artists such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Renée Cox, William Pope.L, Martha Wilson and Cindy Sherman, the author notes how artists in the 1990s responded by working through complex and shifting notions of self that challenged the static identity of earlier work. If fetishisation functioned through the fixing and isolating of identity into a kind of objecthood, these artists pushed against fetishisation – and in doing so began 'seeing differently' (64). In an unexpected theoretical turn, Jones looks to anamorphosis (the practice of intentional perspectival distortion) as an intervention into Cartesian logic. Anamorphosis deliberately upsets the rationality of classical perspective and disturbs the fixity of the image through the introduction of alternative possibilities for perceiving. Additionally, Jones argues, duration is actually introduced through this distorted image that can only resolve itself visually from a precise vantage point over time, and which inherently gestures back to the very act of gazing itself (86). The visions of Gómez-Peña, William Pope.L and others, for Jones, manipulate the logic of fetishisation through their refusal to merely reverse the gaze. They instead mobilise distortion, absorption, dispersal and temporality to strategically unfix the binaries that would suspend them in the role of fetish object.

The fourth chapter provides an excellent, if intensely critical, overview of 1990s multiculturalism and political correctness, particularly as it intersects with art discourses. Keystone exhibitions analysed include the 1993 Whitney Biennial, particularly works by Daniel J Martinez and Glenn Ligon; 'Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art' (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1994–1995); the Studio Museum in Harlem's 'Freestyle' (2005); 'In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice' (University Art Museum, University of California, 1995) and four 'Bad Girls' exhibitions presented during the early 1990s in New York, London, Glasgow and Los Angeles. Jones's critical voice is assertive, impassioned, at moments even vitriolic. The acerbity of her expression is at its sharpest when she refutes the notion that we are 'post-' identity vis-à-vis the terms 'post-black' and 'post-feminism'. The degree to which identity overdetermines daily experience is incongruent, for Jones, with recent effusive proclamations that we have entered a post-identity era of post-raciality. She particularly contests curator Thelma Golden's 'post-black' as a 'disingenuous' term that 'disavows blackness while claiming it as central' (141). Terms like 'post-feminism' and 'post-black', in the author's estimation, while intended to capture a shift in thinking, were too quickly co-opted by popular media and opponents of identity-based art to proclaim the end of all concerns related to socially defined minorities. For these reasons, Jones advocates a broad historical view on previous visual production *as* identity-based, which targets one of the major objectives of this text; namely, to theorise and deconstruct the ideological role that identity plays in dominant art history and criticism.

Undoubtedly the most important and original contribution of *Seeing Differently* is set out in Chapter Five, which introduces 'queer feminist durationality', terminology of her own coinage that articulates one possible critical analytical construct. Jones mobilises this designation to capture a sense of becoming, of duration, contingency, of a challenge to fixity and determinability. Designed to displace the centrality of the Cartesian mindset, the term references a long feminist tradition of critical analysis around how images signify, and how that signification intersects with power. 'Queer', in this case, denotes 'needing to be identified as not identifiable' (176). Queerness denotes tactical disorientation. Borrowing a very open definition set forth by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jones activates the term 'queer' not merely as a moniker for a particular sexual preference; instead, it demarks an array of subjectivities that decentre hetero-normative values, open up potentials or in other ways frustrate static notions of identity. Durationality refers not to time-based or performance-oriented works, but to Henri Bergson's temporal, unfixed phenomenology, and more precisely to his philosophy of embodied experience that is 'of the world' but always a partial image.

The chapter analyses feminist 'cunt art' (or central core imagery) by VALIE EXPORT, VA and Tutt, Judy Chicago, Magdalena Abakanowicz and Mira Schor which interrupts visual codes and conventions that shape representation according to a fundamentally phallic order. Jones's strategic focus on central core imagery and its relation to fetishisation theorises an alternative model that slips the trap of fixity in favour of the relational:

> While classic fetishism requires the flattening and reduction of the body into a picture or containable object to palliate the castration anxious subject, or the containment of the body of a racial other in aesthetic or ethnographic frames, the most effective cunt artworks *reach out* to us, soliciting all sorts of potential recognitions, identifications, and disidentifications through their material evocation of relations among bodies and things, bodies and pictures. (184, emphasis in the original)

This is tied, as well, to the aforementioned anamorphosis, the metaphorical richness of which is mined here to its full extent. Cunt art symbolically functions as anamorphic distortion of phallocentrism, Cartesian rationality and temporal stasis. In this manner, Jones's writing cyclically returns to key ideas, and keeps clearing a path for her intervention into dominant art-historical discourse. It feels very Bergsonian in its shifting durational affinity of meanings, in the many facets of an argument that eventually cohere into a provisional worldview of flowing identifications rather than firmly anchored identities.

Jones also touches on the need for gender and sexuality studies to more fully embrace the ways in which they are crosscut by issues of race, ethnicity, class and other identifications. The author calls, in short, for feminist art theory to be queered as well (180), in order to meet the mounting interpretive needs of an increasingly complex world. While Jones does attribute inclusion of the notion of difference in art practice and scholarship to feminist interventions in the 1970s, the text is squarely anti-essentialist and creates affinities and identifications (125). Ultimately, Jones's theorisation generates a productive tension between codifying the work of feminist contributions to art history and criticism, and admonishing the discipline (feminist art historians included) on the grounds that its political viability in the twenty-first century depends on its ability to stay relevant and 'in the world' (238–239). She challenges art historians and critics to acknowledge that 'of-the-world' dimension of art, to fully understand the role of subjectivity at the most underlying substructures of the field.

Near the end of her contemplation, Jones suggests that the oppositional strategies of the Black Power, second-wave feminist, gay, lesbian and Chicano rights movements were effective – *at first*. But in an increasingly globalised and precarious existence in which perpetual shifts erode any fixed sense of a monolithic 'norm', tactics must evolve to match these new contexts. 'Anything we call art is of this world, of specific bodies/subjects…' she writes. 'It behooves us to attend to our assumptions and beliefs about the bodies/subjects we imagine to have produced each work' (238–239). Surely, an arduous task lies ahead inasmuch as disciplinary transformation is slow, and the openness proposed by Jones fundamentally contradicts fixed notions of expertise so endemic to institutional scholarship. Nonetheless, *Seeing Differently* advances discourse by unearthing a parallel terrain of investigation; one pioneered by artists whose works and times invite equally unprecedented interpretive methods.

In the mid-1960s, Frantz Fanon eloquently captured the dispiriting brutality of being racially fixed under a normative, objectifying gaze:

> I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.[2]

Jones would counter this calcification of subjectivity into objecthood by destabilising the very terms that require such delineation. Though she never frontally broaches the subject, Jones makes an effective critique of intra-disciplinary 'ethics' that become manifested as aesthetics; that generate meanings; and that propagate value systems. *Seeing Differently* provides a compelling intervention into the philosophical investments (and effectively the ethics) of canonical art history and criticism. Queering those systems by presenting another model, Jones's text constitutes a provisional blueprint of contingency, flow and durationality, with ethical ramifications for how difference is seen, valued and ultimately ascribed meaning.

Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*, Routledge, London and New York, 2012

NOTES

1. Here I use the capital 'O' Other to signify in the Lacanian sense of a difference so strange that it cannot be assimilated, and that which defines one's self by way of opposition. One such example is the fundamental binary created between European culture during the colonial period as enlightened versus the coding of Africa as a *dark* continent in which the *light* of civilisation was needed.
2. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove, New York, 1967, p 109

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