

RECLAIMING FEMALE AGENCY



FEMINIST ART HISTORY AFTER POSTMODERNISM

Edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard

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CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments vii

INTRODUCTION RECLAIMING FEMALE AGENCY

Female Subjective Agency and Its Repression

Challenging Masculinist Psychoanalysis

Life after Death (of the Author)

The Gendering of Style

Women Artists Negotiate the Binaries

Intersections of Gender and Ethnicity

A Strategy for the Future

Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard 1

- 1 HERE'S LOOKING AT ME *Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist*
Mary D. Garrard 27

- 2 LEARNING TO BE LOOKED AT *A Portrait of (the Artist as) a Young Woman in Agnès Merlet's Artemisia*
Sheila Ffolliott 49

- 3 ARTEMISIA'S HAND
Mary D. Garrard 63

- 4 THE ANTIQUE HEROINES OF ELISABETTA SIRANI
Babette Bohn 81

- 5 PICTURES FIT FOR A QUEEN *Peter Paul Rubens and the Marie de' Medici Cycle*
Geraldine A. Johnson 101

- 6 THE PORTRAIT OF THE QUEEN *Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's Marie-Antoinette en chemise*
Mary D. Sheriff 121

- 7 DEPOLITICIZING WOMEN *Female Agency, the French Revolution, and the Art of Boucher and David*
Erica Rand 143

- 8 NUDITY À LA GRECQUE IN 1799
Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby 159

- 9 A WOMAN'S PLEASURE *Ingres's Grande Odalisque*
Carol Ockman 187

- 10 CONDUCT UNBECOMING *Daumier and Les Bas-Bleus*
Janis Bergman-Carton 203

- 11 THE GENDERING OF IMPRESSIONISM
Norma Broude 217

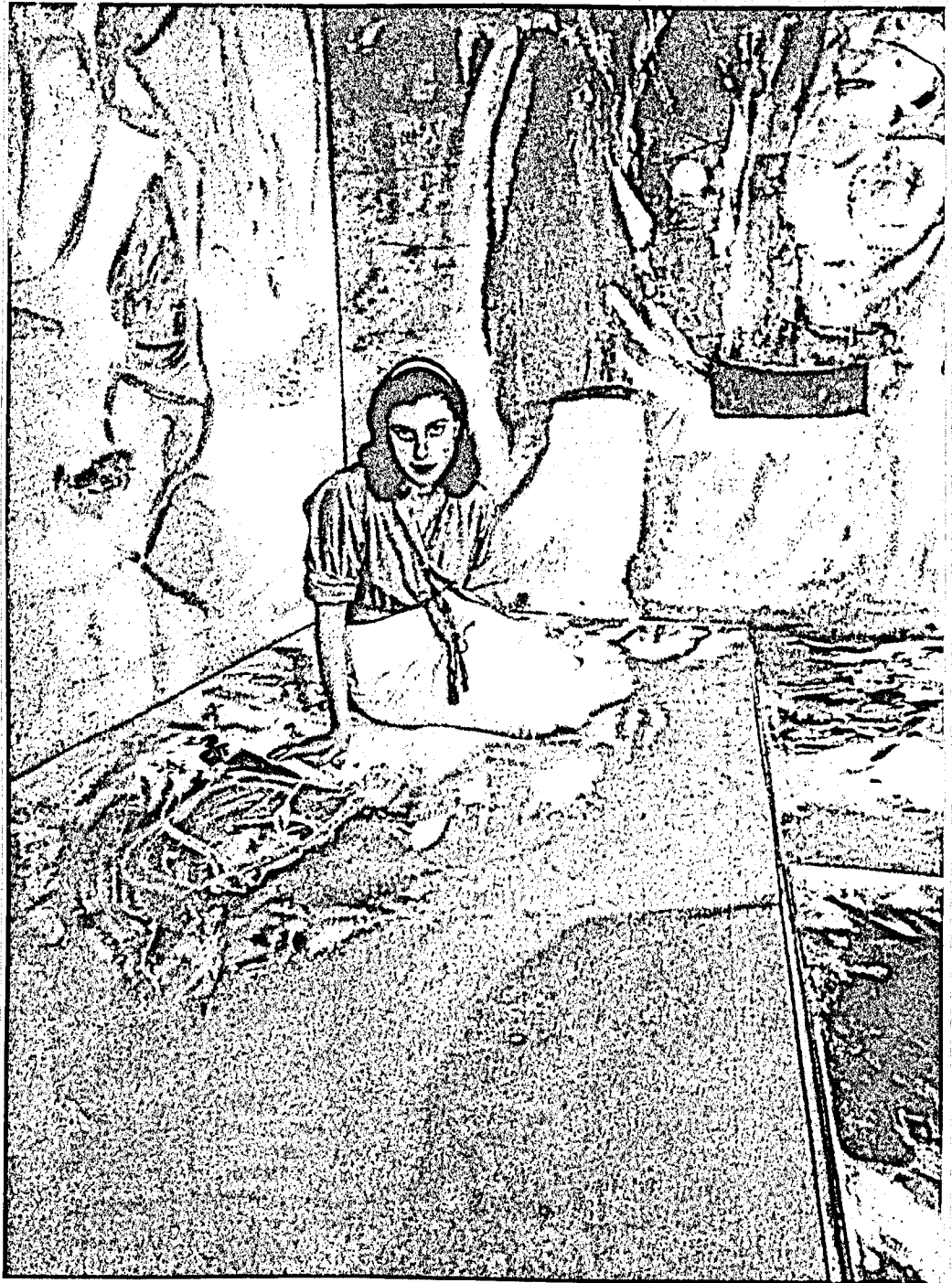
- 12 SELLING, SEDUCTION, AND SOLICITING THE EYE *Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère*
Ruth E. Iskin 235

- 13 MARY CASSATT *Modern Woman or the Cult of True Womanhood?*
Norma Broude 259

- 14 THE "STRENGTH OF THE WEAK"
AS PORTRAYED BY MARIE LAURENCIN
Bridget Elliott 277
- 15 NEW ENCOUNTERS WITH *LES DEMOISELLES*
D'AVIGNON *Gender, Race, and the Origins of*
Cubism
Anna C. Chave 301
- 16 THE NEW WOMAN IN HANNAH HÖCH'S
PHOTOMONTAGES *Issues of Androgyny,*
Bisexuality, and Oscillation
Maud Lavin 325
- 17 CLAUDE CAHUN, MARCEL MOORE, AND
THE COLLABORATIVE CONSTRUCTION
OF A LESBIAN SUBJECTIVITY
Julie Cole 343
- 18 LOUISE BOURGEOIS'S *FEMMES-MAISONS*
Confronting Lacan
Julie Nicoletta 361

- 19 RECONSIDERING THE STAIN *On Gender and*
the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's Painting
Lisa Saltzman 373
- 20 MINIMALISM AND BIOGRAPHY
Anna C. Chave 385
- 21 THE "SEXUAL POLITICS" OF *THE DINNER*
PARTY A Critical Context
Amelia Jones 409
- 22 CULTURAL COLLISIONS *Identity and History*
in the Work of Hung Liu
Allison Arieff 435
- 23 SHIRIN NESHAT *Double Vision*
John B. Ravenal 447

Contributors 459
Index 463



RECONSIDERING THE STAIN

On Gender and the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's Painting

Lisa Saltzman

A RETROSPECTIVE GLANCE at the postwar years of American cultural ascendancy reveals that even as Clement Greenberg's formalism posited abstraction as a site of unqualified purity and autonomy, neither painting nor its critics fully acceded to the rigorous regime of renunciation demanded by his aesthetic ethics of pure abstraction. Not only had insistently metaphoric titles ensnared abstraction in a web of meaning and reminded the viewer of the inevitable operations of likeness and analogy to which even the most obdurately abstract surface remained prey; but, as we know from the very first social art-historical accounts of New York School painting, abstraction—particularly gestural abstraction, with its trace signifiers of individuality and personal freedom—had been all too easily co-opted by cultural cold warriors.¹

If social art historians retrospectively uncovered an idealized American body, or body politic, at play and at stake in the critical and institutional support for and reception of New York School painting, their revisionist account and critique ultimately

identified that body as nothing more than the ideological abstraction it was. That is, the body politic at the heart of the revisionists' accounts, a body politic made up of risk takers and individualists imaged and imagined as the "vital center" of Arthur Schlesinger's postwar account, was at once everyman and no man.²

Or was it? For at stake as well was the body of woman. That is, as abstract and idealized as the vital center of Schlesinger's liberal ideology may have been, I would contend that the body at issue in the reception of New York School painting was far more particular and far more literal than the interpretations of cold war cultural politics would allow. That body was the gendered body, or bodies, of postwar American society, bodies whose social roles were as blurred by the changes wrought by World War II as was the face of painting.

During the years when New York School painting reigned triumphant, categories of gender and their stabilization were a persistent, if unacknowledged, critical preoccupation. As I will demonstrate,

This is a revised version of the essay "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender, Identity, and the New York School" published in the catalogue *Friedel Dzubas: Critical Painting*, with essays by Eric M. Rosenberg and Timothy McElreavy and a foreword by John O'Brian (Medford, Mass.: Tufts University Gallery, 1998). Reprinted by permission of the author and by permission of Tufts University and the Tufts University Gallery.

There are no reproductions here of Frankenthaler's works because the artist's permission to reproduce them could not be secured.

Figure 19.1. Gordon Parks, *Helen Frankenthaler*. From *Life* 42, no. 10 (13 May 1957). Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.

one pictorial form, one painterly process, garnered a great deal of critical attention—namely, the stain. And, as a close analysis of the critical reception of color-field painting reveals, it was the stain that served as an available sign through which to delineate categories of gender. Although it could be argued that gender was simply an available metaphor with which to describe abstract painting, or that characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity were simply appropriate and evocative adjectives with which to give critical voice to the mute surfaces of abstraction, I would suggest that the recurrent critical discourse of gender and corporeality surrounding New York School painting signaled something more particular and significant about both postwar American painting and postwar American society.

That is, if the language of emergent formalist criticism is taken at its word, criticism would seem to have found in these purportedly autonomous, self-reflexive, and hermetic paintings not pure abstraction but a legible subject—namely, the artistic self and, more pointedly, the artist's body. As such, the gendered language of emergent formalist criticism would seem to echo in its response to the radically dispersed, diffuse, all-over surfaces of New York School painting something of a broader societal anxiety about the dissolution of gender boundaries in postwar America.

Despite the prevalence of a gendered metaphoric in the reception of abstraction, very little has been done to analyze its implications, either for New York School painting or for the interpretation of abstraction more generally.³ Even in the work of the first generation of feminist art historians who explicitly took on questions of gender, the interpretation of abstraction was never the primary object of inquiry. This resistance to re-reading abstraction lies in part in the enduring legacy of Greenberg's modernist paradigm for many art historians of the postwar period. But it results as well from the grounding methodological practice of Anglo-American feminist art history, whose materialist hermeneutic typically privileged the analysis of figuration over abstraction.

This essay, then, is fueled by the conviction that feminist scholars of modernist painting are faced with a doubly important challenge. Furthermore, it is grounded in the belief that we can begin to redress this art-historical lacuna regarding questions of gender and abstraction by looking back at the historical context in which both New York School painting and its criticism emerged—namely, postwar America—and directing a particularly focused gaze on the critical reception of color-field painting. For in that critical reception, we can begin to isolate and attend to the marked tendency to insist upon gender, identity, and difference. And we can begin to theorize something like the following: in the face of radical societal transformation, as well as radical artistic developments, art criticism turned these complex paintings into either heroic symbols of masculinity or denigrated emblems of femininity.

The demographic shifts that took place throughout America during and after the war saw their reproduction in the aesthetic microcosm of New York School painting, where women emerged alongside men as principal practitioners. Although women artists did not perform the same vital function for the national economy as Rosie the Riveter, the war did afford women artists opportunities they might not otherwise have had. As John Elderfield would note years later in his monographic study of Helen Frankenthaler, one of the factors that contributed to her artistic development in the 1940s was precisely "her sex, which spared her military service."⁴ As in other industries and professions, once established in their careers, Frankenthaler and other women artists did not retreat from their newly attained positions, nor did their continued presence in the artistic sphere after the war go unnoticed.

During the 1950s, as the careers of these women artists took shape, a number of articles appeared in the popular press, in such magazines as *Life*, *Time*, and *Cosmopolitan*.⁵ These articles, which typically focused on Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Lee

Krasner, and Joan Mitchell, highlighted and even celebrated the ascendance of women artists within the ranks of the New York School. Nevertheless, despite the congratulatory premise and tenor of these articles, they articulated a very different message about the “lady artists” and “vocal girls.” The art world was described as “under siege,” threatened by a “feminine invasion,”⁶ such anxious language reflecting the broader societal message that the former preserves of men were rapidly losing their insularity or, more pointedly, that a woman’s true place was not in the studio but in the home.

At the same time that these articles treated the social phenomenon of the changing face of the art world, they described the changing face of painting itself. In an era of painting characterized as “dealing more directly with emotions and intuitions,”⁷ these articles offered up descriptions of the canvases that ascribed to their surfaces the very characteristics attributed to their female makers. For example, a *Cosmopolitan* reader learned that “the slender, chestnut-haired Helen Frankenthaler, born in New York City thirty-two years ago, is the wife of abstract painter Robert Motherwell,” as a prelude to a similarly indexed description of her “impetuous technique” and her “delicate and subtle” paintings.⁸ Within the popular press, abstract painting in the hands of these “lady artists” and “vocal girls” became a site for the painterly inscription of femininity. In the perceived impetuosity of this emotional and intuitive form of painting, women were regarded as perhaps uniquely suited to its formal demands. Moreover, the perceived subtlety and delicacy achieved in their work was seen as inextricably linked to their identity as women.

It is this tendency to ascribe femininity to the canvases of female abstract painters that unites the writing in the popular press with the more rarified discourses of academic art criticism, as is demonstrated quite dramatically in the reception of Helen Frankenthaler. Consider, for example, the following discussion of Frankenthaler’s unique contribution to the history of Western painting in an article in *Art International* by E. C. Goossen:

Frankenthaler’s painting is manifestly that of a woman. . . . Without Pollock’s painting hers is unthinkable. What she took from him was masculine; the almost hard-edged, linear splashes of duco enamel. What she made with it was distinctly feminine, the broad, bleeding-edged stain on raw linen. With this translation she added a new candidate for the dictionary of plastic forms, the stain.⁹

If the passage is interesting for its attention to patterns of influence, positioning Frankenthaler’s work as distinct from yet inextricably bound to Jackson Pollock’s innovations, it is even more noteworthy for its establishment of sexual difference as determinative of artistic product. Frankenthaler’s painting may have been indebted to Pollock’s, but, at the same time, it was “manifestly that of a woman.” Their painting is distinguished, and distinguishable, according to culturally constructed notions of gender. Pollock’s painting is masculine, as characterized by a linear, hard-edged splash. Frankenthaler’s is feminine, as characterized by a seeping, bleeding-edged stain.¹⁰ In focusing exclusively on the “stain,” on the fluid and coloristic aspects of her work, critics like Goossen leveled the diffuse, complex, and varied surfaces into monolithic entities.

If we turn, for a moment, not to criticism but to its purported subject, the actual paintings, we might note that Frankenthaler’s work was characterized by more than the fluid emblem of the stain. In what was considered her breakthrough painting, *Mountains and Sea* of 1952, conceived and painted after Greenberg introduced her to Pollock and his paintings, it is undeniable that distinct, dark lines trace or subdivide areas of color, the so-called stains.¹¹ Yet despite this dialectical pull between wide pools of colored pigment and thin lines of black paint, between automatism and rigorous control, it was the aspect of the liquid areas of color, the perceived fluidity of Frankenthaler’s soak-stain technique, that endlessly captured the imaginations of the critics. In other words, it was less the thematic and formal invocation

of the rugged terrain and outline of the mountains than the watery depths of the sea to which critics were drawn.

It was this fluidity, specifically the emblematic form of the stain as seen in *Mountains and Sea* and in other examples of this period, such as *Basque Beach* (1958), that provided the touchstone for what became a significantly gendered discourse, one that set Frankenthaler's work apart from that of her modernist male colleagues, past and present. In Frankenthaler's case, the metaphor of the stain was given a particular valence. As Goossen's criticism suggests, Frankenthaler did more than pour paint onto the canvas. She bled on the raw "linen," she stained the sheets. In the slippage between literal and metaphorical language that pervaded the majority of the criticism surrounding Frankenthaler's painting, and which I take this passage by Goossen to bring into particularly sharp focus, Frankenthaler's painting became an extension of her differently female body. Insofar as the stain was also culturally coded as menstrual,¹² its invocation functioned as an index of a thwarted or ineffectual creative process, signifying not creative inception or biological conception, but their refusal, the flushing of an empty womb. Moreover, her menstrual painterly fluids came to signify the trace of an involuntary bodily function, of uncontrolled nature, turning painting into the record of an accident.¹³

This metaphor of automatism, of relinquishing control, of accident, became central to the critical reception of Frankenthaler's creative process. As Harold Rosenberg wrote of Frankenthaler, referring first, as a point of comparison, to those occasional male stainers, Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, and Wassily Kandinsky:

The early paintings with their borrowing from Pollock, Gorky, Kandinsky and other occasional stainers, are sensitive, but more timid than sensitive . . . with Frankenthaler, the artist's action is at a minimum; it is the paint that is active. The artist is the medium of her medium; her part is

limited to selecting aesthetically acceptable effects from the purely accidental behavior of her color. Apparently, Miss Frankenthaler has never grasped the moral and metaphysical basis of Action painting, and since she is content to let the pigment do most of the acting, her paintings fail to develop resistances against which a creative act can take place.¹⁴

In this passage, the presence of the stain is acknowledged in work by male artists. In contrast to Frankenthaler, however, in the hands of Pollock, or Gorky and Kandinsky before him, the stain, if only the occasional stain, could still be redeemed for art, the actions of these men taking place under the aegis of masculinity that protects and defines their work.

As the passage continues, radically different portraits of Pollock and Frankenthaler emerge. Pollock may have flung paint about in a bacchanalian frenzy, but that was part of his mythic, male genius, his actively creative artistic persona, impregnating the virgin canvas with his life-giving seed. Frankenthaler, in contrast, merely allowed accidents to happen, passively staining the linen canvases with the seep and ooze of bodily fluids.

Rosenberg's descriptive summation of the divergent painterly processes of Pollock and Frankenthaler finds its visualization in various photographs of the artists in their studio spaces. For example, in the now iconic Hans Namuth photographs of Pollock at work, Pollock emerges as active, stilled only by the camera shutter in his rhythmic dance of creation, can and brush in hand, paint, like artist, arrested in flight. In contrast, in a shot by Gordon Parks accompanying an article in *Life*, Frankenthaler is depicted sitting demurely atop a canvas, posed against her work less as artist than as mere vessel for the fluids that seep from her body onto the material spread beneath her (fig. 19.1).

Both Rosenberg's critical description of Frankenthaler's painterly process and the photographic image of Frankenthaler in her studio deny her self-consciousness and agency in the symbolic field, the

arena of language, be it written or painterly. If there was some thought or agency recognized or acknowledged in Frankenthaler's work, it was seen simply in her selection of "aesthetically acceptable effects," suggesting the affinity of her practice to the historical and stereotypical female domain of the decorative arts, to the tasks of choosing colors and dyeing fabric. Such work had little, on Rosenberg's account, to do with the "moral and metaphysical" project of painting.¹⁵

The critical gendering of the stain becomes more problematic when it is taken up as a frequent rather than occasional form by a male artist, as was the case with Morris Louis. For no sooner had Frankenthaler begun working with her stain technique than Greenberg took Louis and Kenneth Noland away from their studios in Washington, D.C., into New York to see her work. Louis's ensuing paintings, dubbed the veils and florals, created delicately fluid and watery surfaces that, were I to invoke the same metaphors as the critics whom I have been citing, might be described as equally if not far more "feminine" than Frankenthaler's characteristically bolder, more saturated paintings. Yet despite the undisputed artistic lineage of Louis's paintings, the acknowledged formal similarities between Louis's and Frankenthaler's work, and what I take to be overall the more stereotypical "femininity" of Louis's paintings, his work was received in thoroughly different terms than was Frankenthaler's.

Typically described as "massive," "solid," "hard," and "sharp," Louis's paintings were seen to demonstrate "control," "strength," "clarity," and "firmness," quite a departure from Frankenthaler's accidental, soft, watery, decorative forms.¹⁶ As if responding directly to Rosenberg's diagnosis of the absence of a deliberate "creative act" in Frankenthaler's stain paintings, one critic came to describe Louis's stain paintings as "stiffened by intelligence and consistent formality."¹⁷ In the most decisive ascription of masculinity to Louis's formal project, Noland referred to Louis's paintings as "single-shot" images,¹⁸ in effect reducing and transforming the complex, temporally durational,

additive process of the soak-stain method into an enactment of male orgasm, allowing Louis—the painter of veils and florals—to join the ranks of the virile New York School painters.¹⁹

At times, the critical attempt to maintain aesthetic differences between the canvases of male and female artists produced a confused critical language, one that reveals the utter instability, or so I would suggest, of the gendered categories upon which it so heavily relied. Take, for example, another passage from Goossen's *Art International* piece, in which he sets Frankenthaler's work against Gorky's at the same time that he establishes her contribution of the stain:

The thin curvaceous, form-suggesting line in her early canvases (ca. 1952–53) comes directly from Gorky's mid-40s work. During that period Frankenthaler's colors, similar to Gorky's in their dry feel and tone, were yet paler and more feminine than Gorky's hues. This sounds like a totally unnecessary remark but it is true that many of his later pictures *Agony* (1947) and *The Calendars* (1946–47), for example, have a feminine delicacy in the sensuous line that only a man could have produced.²⁰

In stating that a picture could have "feminine delicacy . . . that only a man could have produced," Goossen makes the claim that if a painting by a man displays "feminine" aspects, it does not mean he is innately feminine, but instead, that he is solely capable, in his masculinity, of enacting femininity, of taking its culturally coded trappings and representing them with admirable, if not superior, skill.

I do not mean to suggest that such criticism posits "feminine" painting in the hands of a male artist as an act of transvestism, camp, or travesty, even if such language begs for such a reading.²¹ Nor do I mean to imply that such criticism anticipates something of French feminist criticism in its valorizing of the feminine within modernist practice,²² even as such criticism makes all too clear the ways in which such feminist theoretical work would prove enormously

productive for interpreting the painterly fields of modernist abstraction.²³ Rather, I am suggesting that its seeming illogic reveals the difficult task criticism took on in rendering stable such fundamentally unstable paintings, such fundamentally unstable categories. It would seem that the only way to conceptualize and control these slippages between categories of gender was to somehow redeem them by incorporating them back into traditional narratives of artistic mastery. Never “unnecessary remarks,” I would suggest that such remarks were instead of the utmost urgency during the years when the changing face of abstract painting (as well as the faces of its practitioners) undermined the binary logic that had previously afforded clearer demarcations between masculinity and femininity.

That Louis’s painting, despite its fundamental indebtedness and similarity to Frankenthaler’s stain painting, could be constructed as supremely and singularly different, and ultimately, supremely and singularly masculine, was a critical fiction that persisted despite the more nuanced interpretations of later critics. For example, in 1971, Michael Fried, heir apparent to the Greenbergian legacy, would at once avow and disavow the dualities of Louis’s painting:

Intrigue ravishes the beholder with its fullness of something like detail: the subtle, modulating color, simultaneously metallic and floral, the warm soft sepia graining of what may have been the last wave of pigment, the delicate irregular, fugitive pattern of the overlapping configurations, the fragile, cloud-like crests of those configurations, aureoled by faint bleeds of thinner, evoking distance. . . . *Terranean* on the other hand strikes one as wholly devoid of incidental felicities. The stained portion looms as though just risen, its proportions together with the dense brown tonality of the whole connoting overwhelming mass, its internal figuration stark, sharp, almost menacing, at once flame-like and mineral in character. And yet, for reasons I have tried to make clear, one’s perception of the stained area as a whole and of the figuration it contains is not of

things that are precisely tangible. Rather, it is as though the apparent massiveness and solidity of the one and the apparent hardness and sharpness of the other are experienced by eyesight alone, without reference to the sense of touch; as though, one might say, massiveness and solidity and hardness and sharpness as such were known to eyesight alone and not to touch; as though the sense of touch itself were strictly visual.²⁴

If the formal dualities of Louis’s paintings are acknowledged in Fried’s treatment of *Intrigue*, a painting that is at once “metallic and floral,” “flame-like and mineral,” these elements of difference are ultimately leveled in the interest of establishing, for Louis, a certain conquest of the “incidental felicities” of the stain, enabling Fried to then put forth *Terranean* as the painting that “establishes a magnitude of realized ambition that only Pollock, perhaps, among Americans had previously achieved.”²⁵ In *Terranean*, the stain no longer is a form that bleeds onto raw linen but, instead, “looms as though just risen,” firmly reinscribed within a gendered metaphors of masculinity, devoid of its previously feminine associations.

Fried’s 1971 text on Louis thus displays in the metaphors of its prose the unacknowledged preoccupation with gender that pervaded discussions of abstraction following its reemergence in America after the war and, moreover, the unacknowledged preoccupation with controlling, through endless categorization, the threat of the feminine. Albeit in quite elegant and sophisticated terms, the move Fried makes in celebrating Louis’s handling of the stain in the name of opticality, in redeeming the feminine in the name of the masculine, is in the end altogether typical of an entire era of formalist criticism. For although painting, rather than the painter, was the expressed subject of nascent formalist criticism, and opticality, rather than corporeality, was its privileged object, it seems that the analysis of modernist painting was in fact repeatedly suffused with discussions of the body, of masculinity and femininity, locating

and displacing gender and artistic subjectivity in and upon the purportedly pure, self-reflexive, autonomous surfaces of high modernist painting. Moreover, in linking artistic practice to the male and female body, critics inscribed gender within and ascribed essentialized gender difference to a school of painting whose shared formal practices rigorously undermined the rigid boundaries of codified sexual difference.²⁶

I have sought with my examples from criticism and painting to reveal that very few of these New York School canvases are exclusively masculine or feminine in their characteristics; nor, if they seem to be, is one set of traits necessarily linked to either the male or the female artist. Whether through metaphors of urination, ejaculation, or menstruation, the body, male and female, is inscribed in multiple and various ways in the drips, spills, sprays, and stains that coat the majority of the canvases of the New York School painters. And it is precisely this intermingling and breakdown of properties of line and color, this breakdown of boundaries, that I believe led critics to at least try to assert, ascribe, and inscribe a sense of normative order.

Perhaps even more important, I would suggest that criticism embodied a response not simply to painterly change but, indeed, to societal transformation as well. The critical tendency to perceive and locate gender in the all-over canvases of the New York School painters can be read as an almost desperate, albeit unacknowledged, attempt to identify and establish difference and maintain order, at precisely a moment when aesthetic practice and social structures emerged radically altered from the Second World War. I have suggested that the strictly delineated gender metaphors of critical language—its seeking and establishing of order—masked and controlled what was, in artistic practice and the social sphere, a shifting terrain, far less fixed and stable than the criticism would initially seem to allow. I have suggested that the diffuse, dehierarchized, all-over can-

vases of the New York School, in evincing some combination of masculine and feminine characteristics, would seem to have transgressed the normative, stabilizing principles of modernist painting, of modernist purity, principles already under siege in society at large.

In their attribution of masculinity to canvases painted by male artists and femininity to those painted by female artists, critics asserted the fundamental primacy of sexual difference, and did so at precisely the moment when gender boundaries were seen as being in danger of disappearing, both artistically and socially. More specifically, in the deeply gendered and fundamentally conservative critical language with which postwar abstraction was received, it was the metaphoric invocation of the stain that was instrumentalized to serve as a particularly powerful signifier of gender, and through that, of difference. Unlike the fluidity that was celebrated in subsequent decades by French feminist theorists, whose concept of *écriture féminine* might be transported into the realm of art history to describe something like a *peinture féminine*, there is no valorization of female bodily functions or libidinal economies in the writing of such art critics. Instead, their writing is a means of segregating, rather than celebrating, certain forms of painting practiced by women.

In many respects, this anxious critical response should not surprise us. Feminist readings of social and cultural history have sought to demonstrate that when a threat to patriarchal society is perceived, an attempt is made to preserve the social order, to reconstitute its boundaries and hierarchies.²⁷ Similarly, and perhaps more broadly, anthropological writings have analyzed and theorized how the establishment of difference or the creation of hierarchical distinctions, both of which can be conceptualized as making order out of disorder, are basic characteristics of human behavior. As Mary Douglas wrote in 1966, "It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created."²⁸

Although from our position in the present, we might now want to recognize and valorize, in their combinations of tangles, skeins of paint, drips, and stains, the painterly invocation and intermingling of gender-coded forms, we must acknowledge that we face New York School painting in a fundamentally different moment than did its original critics. Our critical preoccupations, some acknowledged and others still unacknowledged, have changed. So too, I might add, has the practice of abstraction.

Contemporary abstract practice makes visible, even quite material, the metaphors of the body so pervasive in the criticism surrounding New York School painting. In the work of Ghada Amer, Cecily Brown, Barbara Takanaga, and Sue Williams, the body emerges and recedes upon the picture plane, presence and absence at play in surfaces at once figurative and abstract. Moreover, if we look to contemporary practice more broadly, we see, often in exacting and even microscopic detail, the body and its essential fluids. In the work of such artists as Kiki Smith, Mike Kelley, Curtis Mitchell, and Andres Serrano, for example, liquid traces of the body are duly evoked, inscribed, contained, or rendered, in pieces ranging from the sculptural and the painted to the printed and the photographic. A vivid testimonial to the emancipatory politics and concomitant artistic practices of the late 1960s and 1970s, the work of the 1980s and later also marks a departure. For although contemporary artists have returned to the representation of the body and identity, the invocation of the corporeal is less to celebrate difference in the name of creating equality, as it was circa 1968, than to expose similarity in the name of dismantling the patriarchal logic that produced such inequalities in the first place. In other words, contemporary artists use the body, its pieces and its fluids, to explore the very instability of categories of gender and difference. In works that range across painting, photography, and installation, it is often the stain, the fluid trace of the body, male and female, that serves as an available form, an available sign, through which to screen,

artistically and theoretically, a deconstruction of gender.²⁹

During the era of New York School painting, neither painting nor its criticism was armed with the kinds of political or theoretical knowledge, or self-knowledge, with which many artists and critics now practice their respective crafts. In those years, the stain served as an available sign through which to reconstruct, rather than deconstruct, categories of gender. Within the male bastions of the art world, it was art criticism that assumed the task of preserving tradition, of critically constructing, or reconstructing, through the use of gendered metaphor, a form of painting where men could be men and women could be women. And that critical practice had a particular urgency, if not poignancy. For its reconstruction of gender difference was achieved by locating and asserting difference at precisely a moment when painting and society seemed on the brink of blurring and effacing those formerly rigid boundaries, a moment when painting may have been envisioning not so much its social present as its future.

NOTES

This essay has had many incarnations. First written for Alice Jardine's seminar on French feminist criticism at Harvard University in 1989, it was revised for presentation in Anna Chave's session on modern art at the College Art Association in Chicago in February 1992 and at the Whitney Symposium on American Art in April 1992. Some years later, it was solicited and expanded for the catalogue *Friedel Dzubas: Critical Painting*. The present revised version attempts to reintegrate some of the founding feminist concerns of that 1992 CAA paper with subsequent iterations of the project. I am grateful to Norma Broude and Mary Garrard for their sustained, and sustaining, interest in the piece.

1. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhamer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debates* (New

- York: Harper and Row, 1985), 107–51. Central to Guilbaut's account in particular is Arthur Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: Our Purposes and Perils on the Tightrope of American Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1949).
2. That the body politic is, metaphorically, a male/masculine body, is taken up by Moira Gatens in her "Corporeal Representation in/and the Body Politic," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 80–89.
 3. There has been an emergent body of work within the discipline of art history that addresses questions of gender in relation to abstraction. See Anna C. Chave, "Pollock and Krasner: Script and Postscript," *Res* 24 (Autumn 1993): 95–111; Michael Leja, "Barnett Newman's Solo Tango," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 556–80; and Anne M. Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K.," *Representations* 25 (Winter 1989): 42–57. Since my essay first took shape, see also Griselda Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women: A Woman's Touch in the Cold Zone of American Painting in the 1950s," in *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, ed. Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 219–94; and Anne M. Wagner's "Pollock's Nature, Frankenthaler's Culture," in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 181–99.
 4. John Elderfield, *Frankenthaler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 12. Of course, there had been a long and varied history of women artists, which might suggest that the presence and concomitant treatment of women artists represent more an instance of historical and critical repetition than uniqueness. See Griselda Pollock and Rozsicka Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). But, such studies notwithstanding, the level of emancipation occasioned by the war afforded women heretofore unprecedented opportunities in the public sphere, including the arena of artistic practice.
 5. See "Laurels for Lady Artists: Women Artists in Ascendance: Young Group Reflects Lively Virtues of U.S. Painting," *Life* 42, no. 19 (13 May 1957): 74–77; "The Vocal Girls," *Time* 75, no. 18 (2 May 1960); and Jean Lipman and Cleve Gray, "The Amazing Inventiveness of Women Painters," *Cosmopolitan* 151, no. 4 (October 1960): 62–66.
 6. Lipman and Gray, "The Amazing Inventiveness of Women Painters," 62.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Ibid., 66.
 9. E. C. Goossen, "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art International* 5, no. 8 (20 October 1961): 78.
 10. Of course, men too, including Pollock and, more notably, Morris Louis, could be "stainers." The stain—in French, *la tache*—had been an operative term in modernist criticism since the time of Manet and the Impressionists, and was taken up to describe the importation of Abstract Expressionism into France as Tachisme. Also, as Thierry de Duve notes in his "Time Exposure and the Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox," *October* 5 (Summer 1978): 116, the German word *Mal* (which yields *malen*, to paint) comes from the Latin *macula*, stain. As such, painting is, at its etymological if not ontological essence, staining.
- In regard to the first generation of New York School painters, Michael Fried employs the term *stain* to describe a form in Pollock's work of the early 1950s. But it is done in the name of identifying a form that overcomes the opposition of line and color. See Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum, 1965), 19. In opposition to Fried, Rosalind Krauss points out, in her repudiation of a rigorously formalist reading of a presumptively autonomous modernist practice, that Andy Warhol's Oxidation Paintings reveal to us that the liquid gesture in the work of "Jack the Dripper" always encoded a certain masculine potency. See Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 269–77.
11. Reproductions of Frankenthaler's paintings may be found in John Elderfield, *Helen Frankenthaler* (New York: Abrams, 1989).
 12. See Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, eds., *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); and Emily Martin, "Medical Metaphors of Women's Bodies: Menstruation and Menopause," in *The Woman in the Body* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

13. I should point out that my intent in excavating and interrogating a shifting metaphors of gender in the critical reception of New York School painting is certainly not to deny the way in which these paintings can or do function as expressions of an artist's experience of his or her body. For examples of Frankenthaler's understanding of her painting and its relation to her identity as a woman, see Henry Geldzahler, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," *Artforum* 4, no. 2 (October 1965): 38; and Cindy Nemser, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," *Arts* 46, no. 2 (November 1971): 54.
14. Harold Rosenberg, "Art and Words," in *The Re-Definition of Art* (New York: Horizon Press, 1972), 64.
15. In similar terms, although Frankenthaler worked on an extremely large scale typical of the postwar abstract painters and used oil and acrylics—and bore the legacy not just of Pollock and Hans Hofmann before him, but of André Masson, Joan Miró, and Arshile Gorky—her technique was seen to bear a resemblance to that of watercolor. As such, critics were able to link her work to such American landscape artists as Arthur Dove, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe, establishing a lineage outside of European modernism and implying an intimacy and softness in her paintings despite their monumental scale, which could then be linked specifically to her identity as a woman, providing another means by which to isolate her, not just from a tradition of early-twentieth-century European modernism but from postwar American high modernism.
16. The articles on Louis to which I refer were published in *Art International*, *Arts*, and *Art News* during the 1950s and 1960s, as well as in exhibition catalogues.
17. Elizabeth C. Baker, "Morris Louis: Veiled Illusions," *Art News* 69, no. 2 (April 1970): 36.
18. As cited in E. A. Carmean, Jr., "Morris Louis and the Modern Tradition: I. Abstract Expressionism," *Arts* 51, no. 1 (September 1976): 75.
19. Here we might think specifically of the critical and biographical construction of Jackson Pollock, who came to be seen as a sort of cowboy figure, arriving in New York from the American West and reinvigorating American painting. His paintings were described in ways that furthered and celebrated his virility and masculinity, an act of "casting paint like seed . . . onto the canvas at his feet. This was no sissy . . . it was, demonstrably, the real thing . . . painting composed of (a) . . . manly ejaculatory splat." See William Feaver, "The Kid from Cody," review of the "Jackson Pollock: Drawing into Painting" exhibition in its Oxford, England, Museum of Modern Art venue, 1979, as recorded in Pollock's artist's file at the Museum of Modern Art New York library. These quotations, as well their incisive critique, are found in Anna Chave's article "Pollock and Krasner: Script and Postscript," 95–111.
20. Goossen, "Helen Frankenthaler," 77–78.
21. It is interesting to reflect for a moment here on Clement Greenberg's critical assessment of "the travesty that was cubism" in "Towards a Newer Laocoön" (1940), repr. in Frascina, *Pollock and After*, 44. For is not the "travesty" that was Cubism perhaps Analytic Cubism's quite literal effacing of the recognizable signifiers of the differently male and female body?
22. I refer here to the work of the French theorists Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, among others, each of whom posits, though in fundamentally different ways, the emergence or eruption of a "feminine" impulse in modernist writing.
23. Certainly, the aforementioned work of Chave has done much to forge a productive relation between aspects of French feminist theory and the art-historical enterprise vis-à-vis the interpretation of abstraction.
24. Michael Fried, *Morris Louis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1971), 25–26.
25. Ibid.
26. On the issue, or the question, of essentialism, see the special issue of *differences*, "The Essential Difference: Another Look at Essentialism," vol. 1, no. 2 (Summer 1989), reissued in book form as *The Essential Difference*, ed. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Woods (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994); and the special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, "Writing and Sexual Difference," vol. 8, no. 2 (Winter 1981).
27. See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); and Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).
28. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of*

- Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 4.
29. See Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur, eds., *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1987); Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).