

***Gender and Cultural Criticism:
Feminism and Gender Studies as an arachnology and an indiscipline***¹

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Not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it.

(Adrienne Rich, “Notes toward a Politics of Location”, 1984)²

I want to start this text by sharing some personal and academic information which I believe is relevant in this context. I teach at a Faculty of Human and Social Sciences in a Portuguese University, where the teaching of Feminism and Gender Studies has an important role to play, both as a critical methodology indispensable amongst other recent critical and hermeneutical approaches to the text (be it strictly literary or otherwise visual, i.e., painting, film, performance, etc), and as a way to anchor literature and globally art in social reality, inviting thus a “situated” engagement with the object of our study. It is not however “easy” to teach Feminist/Gender Studies in most places in the world (as it is not easy to be a feminist), and certainly in Portugal this is still the case. You have to fight for it to feed it in the curricula, you have to be prepared to argue your case when you propose a course, or even a discipline within a course, and it is not easy either to find a willing publisher for a book or a collection on the field. I experienced it myself in many instances, concretely by engaging in a few collaborative projects which gave origin in 2002 to a Critical Anthology of Contemporary Feminism, entitled *Gender, Identity and*

¹ This paper is an enlarged and updated version of a previous text presented at the conference *Act Out. Performative Video by Nordic Women Artists*, which took place at the Universidade de Évora, Portugal and published in its Proceedings, edited by Teresa Furtado (*Act Out*, Évora: Licórnio, 2010, pp.14-19). I wish to thank the editor, for allowing me to use my text for this publication.

² Adrienne Rich, “Notes toward a Politics of Location (1984)”, in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-85*, London: Virago, 1987 (pp.212-16).

*Desire*³, for there wasn't any anthology of its kind in Portuguese until then, and along with that a much larger project which, after a long battle for its approval, gave birth in 2005 to the first Portuguese *Dictionary of Feminist Criticism*⁴; and recently, in 2011, the publication of a *Critical Anthology of Gender, Visual Culture and Performance*⁵. The main objective of these projects was (is) to make available and promote in Portugal and concretely within the Portuguese lexicon, the knowledge of the current discussions concerning Gender Studies, the theoretical premises, strategic conceptualizations, methodologies and the larger problematic where they are anchored, not in a static and essentialist manner, but through a transversal and interdisciplinary dynamic rapport and in a dialogue with other fields of knowledge, theories and academic disciplines. And, most important of all, the engagement of students and young researchers in this transversal discipline, by sharing with them an awareness of its proactivity and ever new challenges.

1- Feminism as an interdisciplinary field and an *indiscipline*

Therefore, both as a teacher and a researcher, I can't envision Feminist Studies as a straight jacket or simply as a discipline which should provide a sample of readymade answers on literature or the arts, their authors or creators, and the society that circumscribes them. I rather see Feminist and Gender Studies as an "*indiscipline*" (to borrow a sharp term used by W. J. T. Mitchell in a text called "Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture")⁶, first,

³ Ana Gabriela Macedo (ed.), *Género Identidade e Desejo. Antologia Crítica do Feminismo Contemporâneo*, Ed. Cotovia, Lisboa, 2002.

⁴ Ana Gabriela Macedo and Ana Luísa Amaral (eds), *Dicionário da Crítica Feminista*, Ed. Afrontamento, Porto, 2005.

⁵ Ana Gabriela Macedo and Francesca Rayner (eds), *Género, Cultura Visual e Performance*, CEHUM/Húmus, Braga, 2011.

⁶ WTJ Mitchell, "Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture", *Art Bulletin*, Dec 1995, vol LXXVII, n.4 (pp.540-544).

because “it names a problematic rather than a well defined theoretical object” and, most important yet, since it discloses and therefore renders permeable moments of rupture, turbulence and incoherence “at the inner and outer border of established disciplines”, to quote Mitchell again (p.542). Besides, as an “(inter)discipline”, it lives within and through a cross-fertilization with other disciplines and fields of enquiry never ceasing to problematize itself, its own assumptions, dynamics and strategies. Gender Studies, it is important to say, is a mode of disruption which inhabits a liminal space (Victor Turner, 1977; Stuart Hall, 2000) and thinks rhizomatically across disciplines, fields of knowledge and conceptual borders, in a constant delegitimizing and destabilizing process (Butler, 1990; 1993). Henceforth it is more aptly described as a performative and operational *praxis* engaged in the reflection upon and intervention in concrete reality.

2- Feminism as a *Counter/Diction* and an heteroglossia

Furthermore, I would argue that Feminist Studies should keep its original condition of a “*counter/diction*”, that is, its interpellation and provocative capacity, its disquieting attitude regarding essentialisms and universalisms, and refuse to become one itself. I am here implicitly answering back to Luce Irigaray’s claim, her *parler femme*, as a discursive rejection of phallogocentrism contained in the famous apostrophe “Comment dire l’autre sans le subordonner encore à l’Un?”⁷. But also pointing forward, towards Donna Haraway’s ironic and utopian “Cyborg Manifesto”⁸, which celebrates our “fractured identities” and the “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and [argues for] *responsibility* in their construction” (1991: 150). The “Cyborg Manifesto” moves beyond the

⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Parler n’est jamais neutre*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1985.

⁸ “A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology, a Socialist-Feminism in the Twentieth Century”, (1984) in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The reinvention of Nature*, London, Free Ass. Books, 1991.

“dream of a common language” (as postulated by the North-American poet Adrienne Rich ⁹) and, in true poststructuralist fashion invites us to engage, instead, in the “dream of a powerful and infidel heteroglossia” (Haraway, 1991: 181).

I believe however it is of paramount importance that Feminist Studies should preserve *partially* its utopian dimension. And I say partially, since the preservation of the feminist utopian dimension, as I see it, is a prerequisite for its non-accommodation to the *status quo*, meaning a refusal of ideological instrumentalism and the awareness of its own transgressive condition as a “future anterior of language” (Kristeva, [1974]; 1984); nevertheless, the celebration of its own positive alterity, as both a travelling, rhizomatic theory, must always be anchored in a concrete, engaged praxis.

3- Feminism/ Post-feminism – a global issue?

Another issue worth signalling in this context, is the overriding assumption that we all live in a global “post-feminist world”. This is, it seems to me, a dangerous fallacy which rather too hastily obliterates geographic, social and political differences, in the name of a “pseudo-global world” silencing one of the main ideological struggles of Feminism: the necessity for taking into account the “politics of location” (Adrienne Rich’s reminder), since women know different realities, however much they fight similar battles, in different parts of the world. Thus, the affirmation of the existence of a global post-feminist world is, in my view, as false as the claims for the existence of a global post-modern world.

⁹ Rich, Adrienne, *The Dream of a Common Language. Poems 1974-1977*, New York, Norton, W.W. &Co., 1993. (See the poem, “Origins and History of Consciousness”: “No one lives in this room/without confronting the whiteness of the wall/behind the poems,/ planks of books,/ photographs of dead heroines./ Without contemplating last and late/ the true nature of poetry. The drive/ to connect. The dream of a common language”, p.7).

In fact, the western “civilized world” hastily otherizes the problems that afflict women all over the world (be they sexual, religious, domestic or political discrimination), with a tranquil consciousness; problems which are all too readily identified and harshly denounced in the cultures of *the others*, whereas many equally barbarian traditions and stigma against women are daily sanctioned, sometimes even by law, in the West. Global issues as domestic violence, the traffic of women and children, or female genital mutilation are western issues which the West hardly wants to acknowledge as irrefutable signs of the barbaric. Here too the value of Feminism as an oppositional force, a situated action and a *counter/diction* is, beyond doubt, crucial.

In the final section of this essay I will signal instances of concrete feminist counter/diction through the significant role played by contemporary women artists in this field.

4- Feminism as a “politics of location” and a corpography – bodies as sites of resistance

Intricately linked with the concept of a situated politics or the “politics of location” is another topical issue in Feminism today and crucial for the arts: the politics of the body and the mapping of new feminist corpographies present in the work of most contemporary women artists¹⁰. This situated politics is clearly indebted to the work of Adrienne Rich, which hasn’t ceased to inspire generations of feminists working and creating in a variety of fields:

As a woman I have a country; as a woman I cannot divest myself of that country merely by condemning its government or by saying three times “As a woman

¹⁰ This section of my paper is further developed in a previous essay of mine entitled “Herstories: new cartographies of the feminine and the politics of location”, in *The Controversial Women’s Body: Images and Representations in Literature and Art*, eds. V. Fortunati, A. Lamarra, E. Federici, Bononia: Bononia U.P., 2003 (pp.71-86).

my country is the whole world". (...) Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in – the body. (...). *The politics of location*. Even to begin with my body I have to say that from the outset that body had more than one identity. (...) *Trying as women to see from the centre*. "A politics", I wrote once, "of asking women's questions." We are not "the woman question" asked by somebody else; we are the women who ask the questions¹¹.

Likewise, and closely drawing on these claims, Rich called upon the urge for the *re-vision* of cultural History, as a fundamental strategy in the context of a feminist poetics, where women are performatively engaged as both actors and critical agents, like spiders weaving their own destiny:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival¹².

Therefore, it stands to evidence that the focus on the body as a central location – "the geography closest in" – has indeed become a key term in the discourses that define contemporary feminist thought and agenda: the body symbolically understood as a sign, a construction, a representation and a potential site of resilience and resistance.

The concept of the need for a location and a situated politics is thus inseparable from the reclaiming and the mapping of new female corpographies which critics as Rosi Braidotti, Susan Stanford Friedman, Linda Nochlin, Lynda Nead, or Griselda Pollock, amongst others, have been systematically endorsing.

The work of Griselda Pollock – as feminist scholar, art historian and critic – centred on the articulation of the "new feminisms" and the politics of the body, is of particular relevance in this context and hasn't ceased to

¹¹ Rich, Adrienne, "Notes toward a Politics of Location (1984)", in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-85*, London: Virago, 1987 (pp.212-16). My emphasis.

¹² Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence. Selected Prose 1966-1978*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London [1971; 1979], 1995 (p.35).

resonate amongst a new generation of feminist scholars, critics and art historians¹³. In one of her early texts she claims:

The new feminisms are, in significant ways, a politics of the body – in campaigns around health and the claims for female sexualities, the struggle against violence and assault as well as pornography, the issues of motherhood and ageing. The new politics articulates the specificity of femininity in special relation to the problematic of the body, not as a biological entity, but as the psychically constructed image that provides a location for and imageries of the processes of the unconscious, of desire and fantasy (Pollock, 1996:6)¹⁴.

Today, Feminism is still at odds with this issue, which, however, as Judith Butler argues¹⁵, has somehow shifted from “writing the body” (in tune with the concept of *écriture féminine* postulated by French feminists in the 60s and 70s¹⁶, and even Virginia Woolf’s symbolic killing of the “Angel in the house”, to free the authoress), to “inscribing the materiality of the female body” (Butler, 1993:ix). The awareness of the materiality or corporeality of the feminine, in literature or the arts in general, has thus come to mean the redesigning of the boundaries of the female body and the search for new patterns of representation, in parallel with a redefinition of the patterns of identity, subjectivity, social roles and political citizenship.

5- Feminism as a geopolitics of identity

¹³ See for example the volume edited by Alexandra Kokoli, *Feminism Reframed: Reflections on Art and Difference* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2008), which is deeply indebted to Pollock’s work in the field and aims at establishing a concrete dialogue with one her early publications in this field, namely *Framing Feminism. Art and Women’s Movement 1970-1985*, eds. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, London: Pandora, 1987.

¹⁴ Griselda Pollock, *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

¹⁶ See for example Hélène Cixous’ claims in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (“Le rire de la méduse”, *L’arc*, 1975): “Write your self. ... Your body must be heard. ... To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength ... her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; ... inscribe the breath of the whole woman” in Marks, Elaine and de Courtivron, Isabelle, eds., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, New York: Schocken Books, U. of Mass. P., 1981, p.250; Luce Irigaray’s, “Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un” (*Minuit*, 1977), as well as Julia Kristeva’s “La Femme ce n’est jamais ça” (*Tel quel*, Autumn 1974).

Many other writers, critics and feminist activists have been pointing out in this direction, such as the need for the construction of a “geopolitics of identity”, as claimed by Susan Stanford Friedman¹⁷, accounting for difference, but also embracing contradiction, dislocation and change; or Rosi Braidotti, author of the influential *Nomadic Subjects* (1994)¹⁸, who described the body as “an inter-face, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces, (...) a cultural construction”, and a “place of location”¹⁹.

Notwithstanding, Elizabeth Grosz²⁰ (along the same line of thought as Judith Butler’s) has convincingly argued against the dangers of an excessive “discursivization” of the body, and has proposed, instead, the need for Feminism to come to terms with the body’s *material variety*²¹. Grosz proposes a critique of representation “from within”, which transforms women’s role in art from “a function of men’s self-representations” into “viewers of themselves represented”, subjects who are capable of “returning the gaze” of the viewer (1995: 38). She argues for a critical and empowering aesthetics, where bodies are not opaque surfaces, but meaningful “sites of struggle and resistance”:

Bodies speak, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become intertextuated, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become incarnated. If bodies are traversed and infiltrated by knowledges, meanings, and power, they can also, under certain circumstances, become sites of struggle and resistance, actively inscribing themselves on social practices (Grosz, pp.35-6).

¹⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1998.

¹⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York: Columbia U.P., 1994.

¹⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *Between The No Longer and The Not Yet: Nomadic Variations On The Body* (“Bologna International Women’s Conference”, Sept. 2000; <http://4thbo.women.it/plenary/braidotti.htm>).

²⁰ Grosz, Elizabeth, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995.

²¹ “(...) there is still a strong reluctance to conceptualize the female body as playing a major part in women’s oppression (...). Analyses of the representation of bodies abound, but bodies in their *material variety* still wait to be thought” (Grosz, 1995: 31). My emphasis.

6- Feminist dialogics - women's empowerment and agency

Finally, I want to bring to our discussion a much debated but still burning issue: the relation of Feminism with Postmodernism, namely in the Visual Arts, which I will try to articulate with my previous topic ²². (I will illustrate this point with some images further on in this essay).

I believe it is still important to contextualize our observation of the work produced by many contemporary women artists within the theoretical framework of Postmodernism²³, in order to inquire into the ways Feminism has appropriated or subverted postmodern strategies or indeed added a new, more radical and political perspective to the postmodern questioning of art, namely through its particular usage of the tropes of irony and parody ²⁴ as empowering and “dis-identificatory” strategies.

In fact, as Susan Suleiman has claimed, by bringing a *political edge* to the postmodernist critique of representation, by transforming its practice into an *action and intervention*, Feminism offered Postmodernism a decisive and positive argument for the re-writing and the re-vision of culture, since “if there existed a genuinely feminist postmodernist practice, then postmodernism could no longer be seen as the expression of a fragmented, exhausted culture steeped in nostalgia for a lost centre” (Suleiman, 1990: 188-9) ²⁵.

²² I developed this issue in a longer essay entitled, “*O sorriso da Gioconda: Feminismo, arte e performance*”, in *Simone de Beauvoir*, eds Isabel Capeloa Gil and Manuel Cândido Pimentel, U. Católica, Vega: Lisboa, 2010 (pp.187-206).

²³ See the seminal essay by Susan Rubin Suleiman “Opposition in Babel? The Political status of Postmodern Intertextuality”, in *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde*, Routledge: Harvard U.P., Cambridge, Mass., 1990 (pp.191-7).

²⁴ For a further discussion of this debate see, among others, Craig Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post-Modernism” in Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983; Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Post-modernism*, Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1986; Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1988; Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1989.

²⁵ As Suleiman adds, more than simply describing a feminist postmodern aesthetics, the essential thing is to understand its practice as an action or as an intervention, “an object to be read or a statement requiring a response” (Suleiman, pp.188-9).

Another crucial critic in this context is Linda Hutcheon who, in a series of influential books and articles published throughout the 80s and 90s (i.e., *The Poetics of Postmodernism*; *The Politics of Postmodernism*; *Irony's Edge*) has developed an instigating argument and consistently called attention to the “oblique relation” that Postmodernism has developed with Feminism and vice-versa, and how the feminist interventionist action has been affecting the redefinition of the concept of the postmodern itself, touching upon its ambiguous relation with History (through a paradoxical relation of complicity and criticism) ²⁶. It is in this view that Feminism has aptly been defined as the “cutting edge” of Postmodernism” ²⁷.

Within the cross-fertilization of Feminism and Postmodernism it is also worth mentioning the influential work of Jo Ann Isaak, and her publication of *The Revolutionary Power of Feminist Laughter* ²⁸, for its focused analysis of the work of many contemporary women artists in the context of both Feminism and Postmodernism, signalling the performative disruption they enact, their transgression of inherited models, traditions and rhetoric of representation (Isaak, 1996; Macedo, 2005).

Beyond these considerations, one should not obliterate the concept and strategy of *utopia* as a fundamental trace which cannot be dissociated from any emancipatory movement, be it social or aesthetic, or both, as in the present case – cementing the strategies of empowerment and agency that are at stake in the ongoing process of a feminist *écriture* or a feminist *peinture*, as it has been often signalled (Tickner, 1987²⁹; Haraway, 1991; Friedman, 1998; Segal, 2000).

²⁶ See Hutcheon in “Fringe Interferences: Postmodern Border Tensions”, *Style* 22, 2 (1988), p.300.

²⁷ Margaret Ferguson e Jennifer Wicke, eds, *Feminism and Postmodernism*, Bloomington, Duke U.P., 1992 (p.4).

²⁸ Jo Ann Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Woman's Laughter*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

²⁹ Lisa Tickner in the essay “Nancy Spero: Images of women and ‘la peinture féminine’”, defines a “feminist peinture” as a search for “women’s meanings, a woman’s language or iconography” (Tickner, 1987: 10).

7- Feminism as an *arachnology* and a corporeal intertextuality

Coming back to our initial spider allegory, I want to recall Nancy Miller's celebrated essay, "Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, the Critic" (1986)³⁰, which transgressively appropriates Roland Barthes' metaphor and conceptualization of the text as a concrete "texture" or "tissue" ["Le Plaisir du texte", (1973)]. In turn, Miller proposes a rhetoric of female creativity and feminist labour metaphorically anchored in the traditional activity of women throughout History, as weavers or mythic "arachne", as Penelope or Ariadne. Hereby she subverts the structuralist notion of the "death of the author" and the text as a crossing, a kernel and multiplicity of threads and reformulates it instead, in the feminine, through a conceptualization akin to Elaine Showalter's "gynocriticism" (1981) or Alice Jardine's "gynesis" (1985)³¹.

In a similar vein, Susan Stanford Friedman³² argues against a masculinist canon, proposing instead a matrilineal genealogy, sustained by a femine figurative rhetoric:

Figures of women at the loom and needle, women weaving, crones spinning – these became central tropes of women's creativity during the rise and heyday of feminist theory and criticism in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. (Friedman, 2005: 215).

³⁰ In Nancy Miller (ed.), *The Poetics of Gender* (pp. 270-295). New York: Columbia U.P. In this text Miller claims "(...) if Barthes had been less fond of neologisms, and a feminist, he might have named his theory of text production an "arachnology" (p.271).

³¹ See Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics" (1979) and "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981), republished in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter, London: Virago, 1989; Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1985. In 1982, Jardine published in *Diacritics* (Summer 1982) an essay entitled "Gynesis". Also in this context, see by Gayatri Spivak, "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman", in *Displacement: Derrida and After*, ed. Mark Krupnick, Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1983. A discussion of the concept "Ginocrítica" in Portuguese is given in *Dicionário da Crítica Feminista*, Ana Gabriela Macedo e Ana Luísa Amaral (eds), Porto, Afrontamento, 2005 (pp.88-9).

³² Susan Stanford Friedman, "Migration, Encounter and Indigenisation: New Ways of Thinking about Intertextuality in Women's Writing", in *European Intertexts*, vol. 13, 2005 (pp.215-271).

Hence the abstract concept of intertextuality becomes corporeal and sexualized, and thus historically and politically anchored in concrete notions of sex, gender and race.

In sum, my aim in this paper has been to debate a conceptualization of Gender Studies which deploys a strategic form of cultural criticism, one that simultaneously envisages contemporary feminist art and its new corpographies as a localized praxis, engaged in the dis-identification of women from oppressive modes of cultural representation, and which proposes concrete strategies of female empowerment and agency in the contemporary world. Moreover, I argue that these new corpographies are the embodiment of an aesthetics of resistance, which undeniably has its roots in a version of Feminism that affirms plurality, complexity and dissonance, while it challenges homology and essential truths.

I would like to end this text by offering some concrete examples of this dis-ruptive mode within contemporary feminist art, by briefly looking into three images by three well known feminine artists of different generations: the surrealist photographer Dora Maar, born in Paris in 1907, the muse of surrealist artists such as Man Ray, Bataille and Picasso, who nevertheless stood as a notorious woman photographer in a masculine world, within the early twentieth century avant-garde; the French-born artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois (1911- 2010) who traversed almost the entire 20th century and irrupted in the 21st with the radical complexity of her work which never ceased to disturb the *status quo* and transcend different canons of art; the Portuguese artist, Paula Rego (1936-), long since living in the UK, and acclaimed as one of the internationally leading contemporary artists, who has been consistently subverting and questioning the so-called “Great Masters’ tradition” and creating powerful visual

narratives, while inscribing her decentred female point of view and her feminist commentary upon them³³.

The three images I want to focus on share the same concern with performativity, a concept I referred earlier on, and a similar rhetorical ambivalence and liminality, which I see anchored in their interdisciplinary roots, their breaking of boundaries and borders, that is, the gesture of *indisciplinarity* that characterizes them. Each of the three images translates a specific rhetoric of the female principle, invested with assimilated signifieds, but implicitly subverted by exposing them “à la limite”. Such is the case of Dora Maar’s photo “Les années vous guettent” (1936), at first sight a perfect metonymy of seduction, desire, the eternal feminine, nevertheless represented as if through a mask, since the woman’s face is covered by a spider’s web, thus estranged from the gaze of the viewer, while evoking the myths of Penelope and Ariadne and the weaving of the thread that sustains life and preserves memory. The second image is a parodic representation of motherhood, embodied in a gigantic Spider (a bronze and steel sculpture, nine meters high, which since 1999 has been exhibited in the most important museums of the world), and which Louise Bourgeois has significantly entitled “Maman”. This powerful sculpture has, not surprisingly, given origin to a large amount of critical work, which is still in a crescendo³⁴. In all its majestic dimension, Bourgeois’s “Maman”, is simultaneously dis-identificatory of clichés of womanhood and maternity, (fragility, complicity, submission), as it is also clearly endorses female empowerment, agency and resilience, signifying at once protection and imprisonment, caring and aggressive action.

³³ For a detailed analysis of Rego’s work as the creator of visual narratives see my book, *Paula Rego e o poder da visão: ‘a minha pintura é como uma história interior’*, Lisboa: Cotovia, 2010.

³⁴ Amongst others see Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’s Spider. The architecture of art-writing*, Chicago and London: The U. of Chicago P., 2001; Rosemary Betterton, “Louise Bourgeois, ageing and maternal bodies”, *Feminist Review*, 2009, pp.1-19.

The third image, Paula Rego's "The artist in her studio" (1993), directly engages with the viewer as a reframing and *re-vision* of numberless other images throughout the History of Art, where the artist represents himself in control of his own territory, the atelier. Rego offers here what I call a mirror image or a counter-reading of the traditional formula, in that she invests the woman artist, mostly objectified through art History as the passive model, into an agent and fabricator of her own history – no longer muse or model, she is the artist herself, represented in full control of her *métier*, weaving her own destiny, likewise Bourgeois's spider, and to a certain extent Dora Maar's represented woman, and therefore asserting her creativity.

My claim is that the three images metonymically illustrate contemporary women's art as a dissonant, resilient and performative aesthetics, deeply engaged in a constant delegitimizing and destabilizing process.



Fig. 1 – Dora Maar, “Les Années vous guettent” (1936).
© Dora Maar, Paris, Adagp, 2012.



Fig. 2 – Louise Bourgeois, MAMAN, 1999. Bronze, stainless steel and marble 927.1 x 891.5 x 1023.6 cm. Collection The Easton Foundation. Photo: Nic Tenwiggenhorn
(c) Louise Bourgeois Trust/VAGA, NY/SPA, Lisbon.

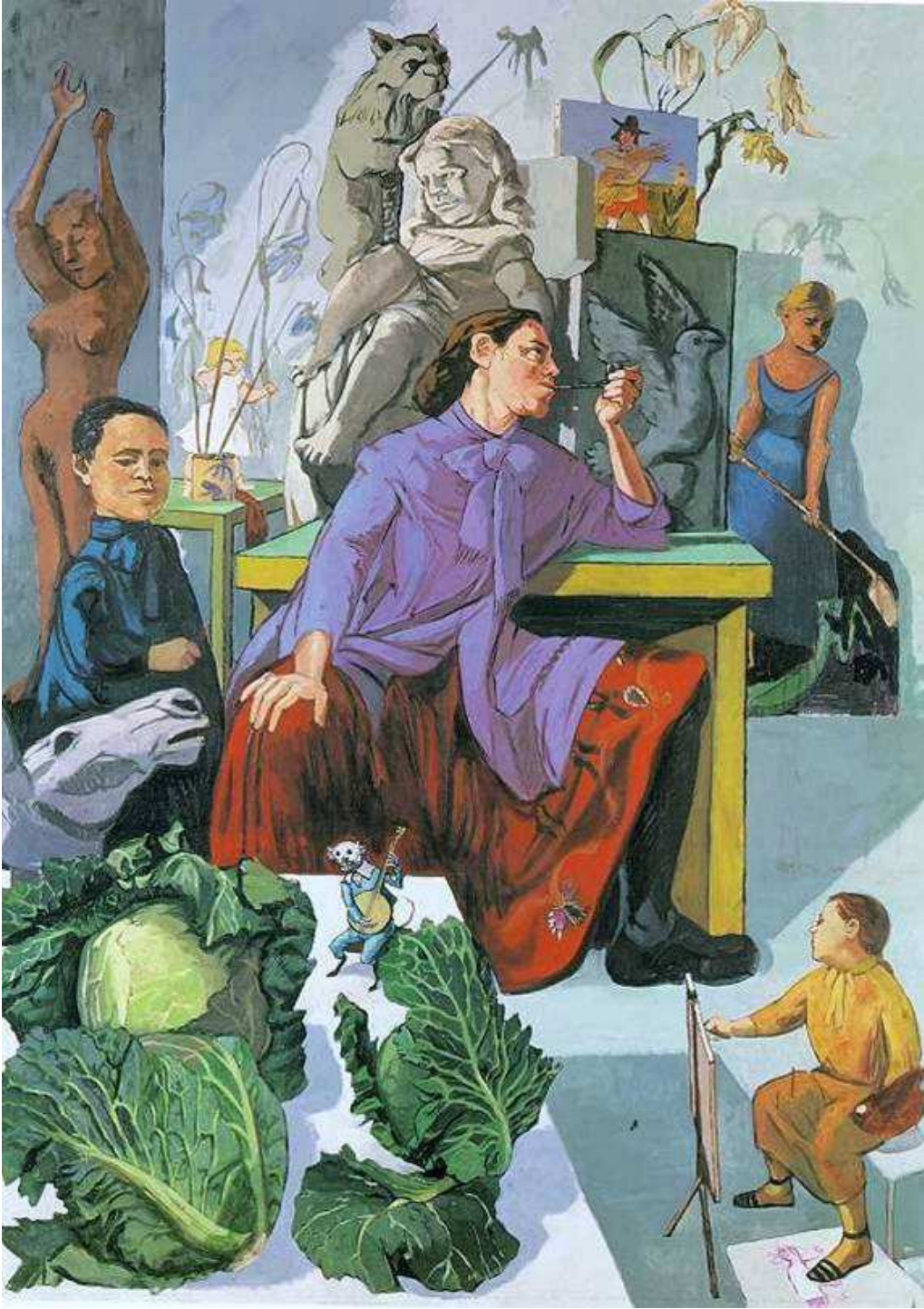


Fig. 3 – Paula Rego, *The Artist in her Studio* (1993).
Acrylic on paper laid on canvas. (Courtesy of the artist)

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