

‘Interview with Amelia Jones’

Paris Lettau & Amelia Winata

In March 2018, the American art historian Amelia Jones held a series of lectures and workshops in Melbourne. Paris Lettau and Amelia Winata spoke with her about her forthcoming book *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance*, identity politics, feminist art, intersectionality, “creepy feminism”, Cambridge Analytica, Trump, minimalism and homophobia, amongst other things.

Paris Lettau & Amelia Winata...

Your current work on intersectionality has moved quite far from your early focus in the 1990s on modernism and performance art. How do you understand this shift in your research trajectory?

Amelia Jones...

From the beginning, I always thought about marginalised groups. Even though my book on New York Dada was titled *Irrational Modernism* (2004), I never positioned myself as a modernist. That book is actually about the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, someone who was marginalised from histories of Dada because she was German and a woman. In that sense, the book was quite compatible with my current thinking because it was looking at the structures of how histories get written; how these histories leave out certain kinds of people. As with my ongoing scholarship and writing, *Irrational Modernism* looks at structures of power (including history writing) as a way of interrogating art history as a meaning- and value-making discipline.

I was always concerned with identity and identification as structures that inform the meaning and value we attach to art and performance. I think in the process I’ve been more successful, I hope, in pushing questions of sex/gender identification, which has always been a key focus in my work, towards an understanding of this axis as always already co-determined by a myriad of other identifications. Sexuality is always raced. Performance and queer-feminist theory, post-colonial, anti-racist, and decolonial theory all aid in this move to complicate the way I was dealing with feminist issues in the past.

A lot of scholars got left behind in that sense.

There are a lot of people who still do what we might shorthand as ‘straight white feminism’. For me, my feminism is essentially about understanding power in the world. I would fail at this if I wasn’t paying attention to how power structures are changing according to continually shifting and relational concepts of gender, race, and class. These concepts shape how we are in the world. At the beginning of my career, I don’t think I was

doing this as well as I am now because I was more absorbed in what was, at the time, a straight white feminist discourse. I would include the work of Black and Chicana artists in my analyses but wasn’t fully understanding how race *always* conditions experiences and interpretations of gender.

From the beginning of my career as a scholar around 1990 I tried to consider other elements of identity, but I think this has only been successful in my work over the past ten years, possibly because of own feelings of having my identity destabilised while living abroad—in the UK in 2003, Canada in 2010 and then back to the USA in 2014.

At your Victoria College of the Arts Art Forum lecture you pointed out that you have found there to be a schism between yourself and new generations of feminist scholars.

That’s a huge problem. I have directly engaged some younger feminist scholars on their tendency to exclude previous work that set the ground for their research on gender, sexuality, and visual art or performance. It’s uncomfortable. For example, I’ve tried—I hope generously—to question scholars in public, and I have even continued dialogue via email, so that this becomes a larger discussion rather than just looking like sour grapes from a scholar who is angry her work isn’t being cited. It’s not personal. The issue—in an age of fake news—is doing our homework and attending to the previous scholars and histories that make our work possible. I was taught in graduate school that this was our main responsibility as scholars, but much of this kind of generosity, and, I’m afraid, much of the ability to do deep research that acknowledges intellectual histories, seems to have been lost in the age of the internet.

It’s even worse with a much younger generation who are at university now. They are embedded in social media and the only thing that they cite is *Artforum* because that’s what comes up on their Google searches.

It’s personally frustrating and hurtful when you feel your work has laid ground but is not cited. You want to matter if you’re making art, making culture or writing something. But that’s just a personal ego issue. The point is that it’s politically noxious because that’s what the internet wants you to do, that’s what the corporations want you to do—to forget about the past. If we’re going to create change we need to know how people created change in the past. We need to honour the strategies that have occurred before us. We also need to know where a strategy came from so it’s not just arbitrary. To me, these issues are actually politically crucial, not peripheral to what we are trying to do, but constitutive of it.

Your new work on performance aims to do this historical work: to historicise, for example, our languages around ‘queerness’ and the ‘performative’.

Exactly. If we are going to say something is really ‘queering’, or that something is ‘performative’, we not only need to know what that means but also where that language has come from. I’m not into legislating, or into saying that something is or is not ‘queer’ or ‘performative’—even though I get asked to do so—because that’s part of the problem. However, if we don’t understand where these concepts are coming from and what it means to say that something is ‘queer’ or ‘queering’, then they are not very useful terms. It’s just a lazy way of short-handing a whole bunch of assumptions that we may not even realise we have.

As if without historical understanding these concepts lack an element of their criticality?

Yes, if you’re using a word in a lazy way without really thinking about the full implications of what it means, of what it has meant in the past, and why it started to be used in the first place, then you’re not using it critically at all. It all really comes down to self-reflexivity and being aware of the assumptions that are packed into your own language.

What has the research for your new book revealed about how these vocabularies have emerged and evolved?

You’ll have to read the book. In terms of the structure, I’ve arranged each chapter on a term that I then historicise in rough chronological order up to the point that the term emerged as a central concern in visual and performance art discourses. In order, the chapter titles are ‘performativity’, ‘relationality’, ‘theatricality’, ‘queer’, and ‘trans’. I’m currently writing the ‘theatricality’ chapter. In the chapter, I’m looking at the interconnections between ideas about theatre and the theatrical, as well as preconceptions about gay men—mostly white—living in urban areas of Euro-America. Not surprisingly, both art and theatre critics express pretty explicit homophobia in relation to the idea of theatricality.

Have you also engaged with these ideas in your curatorial work? To what extent have you found your art historical work and curatorial practice offer different terrains on which to engage these questions?

Yes, of course. My curatorial work expands upon my scholarly work or sometimes—as with *Material Traces*, a show I curated in 2013 in Montréal—lays a groundwork for scholarly and theoretical work. In the catalogue I wrote an extensive article on new materialism, art, performance, and a politics of reception and interpretation, which was published in *The Drama Review* in 2015, called ‘Material Traces: Performance, Artistic “Work”, and New Concepts of Agency.’

My shows have always been organised from a feminist point of view. Currently, I’m in the process

of curating a retrospective of the work of queer performance artist Ron Athey, which addresses his practice in relation to queer community. It’s a feminist approach to a monographic show, which understands both his role in forming community, but also how he has been informed by larger cultural movements and communities.

Engaging with marginalised groups is becoming a renewed issue today with the widespread restaging of exhibitions from the 1960s and 1970s—a time when there was obviously little focus on representation. For example, the National Gallery of Victoria here in Melbourne is about to restage an exhibition from 1968 called *The Field*—the exhibition that heralded the institutional acceptance of hard edge, minimalist, and abstract art in Australia. There were forty artists, but only three were women, even though there were obviously many more women artists painting and making sculpture in this style at the time. The NGV has decided to be historically faithful and will not include other female artists working at the time. Aware of this historical omission, however, the NGV plans to present a separate display of colour field and abstract works by contemporaneous Australian female artists (such as Margaret Worth, Lesley Dumbrell and Virginia Cuppaige); these will be displayed in a separate room on Level Two of the Gallery, roughly coinciding with the dates of *The Field Revisited*. What are your thoughts on this kind of curatorial strategy of inclusion?

I can see both sides of why that is and isn’t a good idea. I can see the logic behind not just changing the show and inserting women because then you’ve erased the original misogyny or sexism of the 1960s. But then by including them in a separate area you’re just kind of reasserting how they are not part of the same lineage or conversation.

I think what the NGV has done, though, is probably a better decision, to separate them and remind people—as long as they remind people that the exclusion happened—because that might actually be really productive in provoking younger people to ask ‘why would you leave them out?’ I think this solution is better than just attempting to weave something in and pretending that this work was part of the original show.

You’ve also worked with the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art here, where the current show *Unfinished Business* has an intersectional curatorium of five women plus Artistic Director of ACCA, Max Delany. As ACCA’s Artistic Director, however, Delany has overseen the entire project, which has led some detractors to complain that he is merely following a fashion for male curators to suddenly be interested in feminism.

I actually have a polemical manifesto—which is part of a group of manifestos I hope to publish as a book soon—on the idea of “creepy feminism”. However, I fully support the curation of the feminist show at ACCA. It’s really informative and also fun. I don’t know the history of Max Delany’s relationship to feminism, but I think he has overseen an important show.

So this is not what you mean by “creepy feminism”?

When I used the term “creepy feminism”, I was referring to people who were once explicitly anti-feminist; it does not apply to male-identified people who have been consistent in supporting feminism across their careers.

These are men—such as Dave Hickey and Paul Schimmel—who long rejected feminist art and discourse as peripheral or “ideological”, as resting on identity politics or political correctness. Now all of a sudden, since around 2010, they have begun curating feminist shows or writing about women’s art. An interesting example is Paul Schimmel, who in 1992 did *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, basically a “dude show”—although an important one—and then suddenly in 2016 he co-curated a feminist show with Jenny Sorkin *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016* at Hauser, Wirth & Schimmel in Los Angeles. That really came across as creepy feminism. The general consensus, based on Sorkin’s extensive work on feminist issues in art history and Schimmel’s known resistance to feminism or other forms of identity politics, was that Schimmel was getting credit but the show was really Sorkin’s—this seems consistent with what we know about Schimmel’s curatorial work, which never addressed feminism and tended to favour macho themes (such as *Helter Skelter*). The show was fully consistent with her rigorous research and her curatorial eye. Or even worse, Dave Hickey, whose art criticism has long explicitly rejected feminist politics and has courted charges of misogyny and racism (the latter, for example, in his account of Robert Mapplethorpe’s erotic photographs of Black men). He’s now written a book about women artists called *25 Women: Essays on Their Art*, 2016. Or Peter Schjeldahl from *The New Yorker* who, as recently as ten years ago, was scoffing at any curating that was driven by political concerns and identity politics. Now he’s writing weekly in *The New Yorker* about shows of work by women artists, African American artists, and even group shows driven by political concerns. In his case, there have actually been a couple of articles where he has been convincing in apologising for his past attitudes, so I’m willing to give him a tiny bit of credit. But most of this creepy feminism is really noxious. It’s so obviously a situation where if something becomes market friendly, or makes you look better as an intellectual or as a curator, that’s when you take it on.

It also raises a question about how long this lasts and whether these people keep doing it once the fashion passes.

They’ll probably be dead by then. They’re all old white men.

We’ve just got to wait for them to die out.

Then there are public cases in which women artists, curators, and scholars finally have a voice—often on social media—that allows them to seek redress for mistreatment, sexism, harassment. There was a recent harassment case at *Artforum*, for example, where the co-owner and former publisher Knight Landesman was accused of harassment. In other cases, however, it’s concerning when the newly visible righteousness about sexual harassment and unfair pay and workplace practices in relation to women so quickly turns into a blame-fest. Sometimes, for example, women who might have been fired for legitimate reasons are set up as martyrs. We have to be very careful not just to ‘like’ and repeat stories without trying to find out the facts. Such blaming and shaming on social media ends up completely debasing the mostly legitimate claims against sexist and patriarchal behaviour and policies. We need to be much more careful about these issues, how we debate them, and how we circulate and ratify often false information.

People are taking these kinds of incidents at face value because, like what you allude to, on social media it’s portrayed as completely black and white.

When you’ve been a victim of that, which I was when I arrived at USC Roski School of Art, you can really see the danger. At the time, the art school was going through a scandal. Seven MFA students walked out and were posting all these things and lambasting me and other members of the faculty on social media, calling me names and hacking my Wikipedia page to put false information. It was usually pretty obvious, though, like ‘Amelia Jones is a corporate lackey’ kind of thing. The question I asked was: how is this productive? How does this help create a better, more affordable environment for the students? In essence, the faculty responsible for the walk out ended up preventing seven students from obtaining an almost free MFA. The whole ‘revolt’ ended up serving the faculty’s interests. They even promoted their cause in *Artforum* through a roundtable, but not that of the students.

From a certain perspective incidents like this are also tied into the broader political situation, where social media platforms are used in a very problematic way to achieve political objectives like winning an election. In the preface to your book *Seeing Differently* (2012),

you outlined and challenged a common opinion at the time that we were living in a era of 'post-identity'. You began writing the book in 2008, at the time of the Obama and Clinton primaries. Now we've arrived at Trump and it seems like you were so clearly correct. In hindsight, it seems so strange to read the introduction to that book and for it to have been contentious that identity politics still matter. Can you talk to that very rapid historical transition from the Obama-Clinton period to the Trump era—how have you witnessed this shift in consensus about the centrality of identity politics, in art and in politics?

Well, yes, absolutely! I was and still am very clear on the centrality of assumptions about identity, not only to how we make, curate, and write about art, but to how we do just about anything and everything in our daily lives. There is no interpersonal exchange we have that is not fully saturated with beliefs about who we are, who the other person is, where we stand in relation to them, and so on. All Trump has done is to bring to the surface the more noxious side of this. The only positive that might come out of this nightmare we are living through—not just in the US, but also very clearly also in Europe, Australia, and elsewhere—is a less naïve and heightened awareness of how these assumptions and ideas motivate all of our actions. Whether it's big, i.e., Trump threatening the leader of North Korea like a boy with a stick, or it's small, i.e., me feeling threatened by another scholar who is encroaching on my territory. Get with it. Pay attention. How are you reacting to a work of art, a person, a situation? If you pay attention to your reactions and deal with them self-reflexively you can avoid increasing antagonism between self and perceived "others". This is the only thing I can see saving us in this era of explicit racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, and outright hatefulness.

The renewed importance of identity politics has also fuelled further divisions within the left.

I actually brought this up at the VCA Art Forum seminar I did: that factions within the left have habitually spent a lot of energy bringing each other down. We criticise ourselves and act overly introspective, as we did during the Obama-Clinton era. Then, everyone in academia and the art world was critiquing neo-liberalism. Now, of course, we have to admit it doesn't look so bad because in fact we—not just academics, but all members of the art world—were completely supported and privileged by neoliberalism. This was something we never wanted to admit at the time. I think we really need to get on our own hypocrisy. But we also need to stop eating ourselves alive because that's exactly what the far right wants us to do. They have a whole mechanism in place

to plant these disputes—they have robotic trolls that go onto our Facebook accounts, they get us all exercised and ready to attack each other. I don't want to be overly Orwellian, but they are doing that—it is a fact. We really need to stop. It goes back to what I was saying about not just taking a sound bite about a protest or institutional conflict, liking it and sharing it when you really don't know what has happened.

Because you become a kind of cog in a larger machine?

You are. You are inhabiting a Althusserian space—but it's not even Althusserian because it's external to your internalised Althusserian ideological self.

That's actually quite topical in the context of the recent Cambridge Analytica controversy. In his publicity of the company, the former CEO Alexander Nix, has been quite explicit that demographics, the usual markers of identity politics—race, class, gender, age—are not very useful when predicting how someone is going to behave. Instead, he says, they use psychographics to target political messaging according to personality type and not according to one's identity politics. Of course, this is quite possibly just marketing by Cambridge Analytica, but it's also possibly something that's really believed by figures like Trump who pay for their services. So there's this interesting thing going on where there appears to be a return to identity politics, but in the alleged mechanics that allow for someone to get elected, where individual decision-making and behaviours are influenced through Facebook feeds and other communicative channels, there could be a kind of post-identity politics going on.

I don't think that's post-identity politics, it's more of a micro-identity politics.

Yes, absolutely. And we were thinking you could almost call it a kind of intersectional politics—a kind of appropriation by the right of an intersectional methodology.

It's weird and it's terrifying. Again, as a teacher my primary goal is to teach basic historical information and, perhaps more importantly even than that, to teach critical thinking—not only of what you are encountering, but of your own thought processes and reactions. Why do you want to 'like' this particular thing on Facebook. No doubt it is a brief performance of your sense of identity as a righteous political person. Ask yourself how much of what you are liking or sharing or commenting on you actually know to be factually true.

Can we finish with Michael Fried being a homophobe? This was something you raised

in your VCA Art Forum lecture: that he wasn't afraid of minimalism, he was afraid of queerness.

Absolutely. Why would you be afraid of slabs of metal?

All these years I've taught Fried's influential article 'Art and Objecthood' (*Artforum*, 1967) as implicitly homophobic and misogynist. The typical 18-year-old undergrad who has never thought about art before immediately understands there is something very odd about this white, male, highly enfranchised art critic getting in a wax about a bunch of slabs of metal on the floor. This guy is really upset and you're showing them images of Richard Serra's works, and they're just like 'why is he so upset?' They *know* something is up. That's what teaching is about—never teach a text as if it's fact, you teach it as an ideologically over-determined argument and let the students unravel it. Even if it's my own text. That's always been a really rich process for me.

So I've been teaching the text as implicitly homophobic only to discover that Fried's homophobia was (and possibly still is?) explicit. The art historian Christa Robbins at University of Virginia has recently discovered a letter that Fried wrote to the editor of *Artforum* in 1967—at the time he was writing 'Art and Objecthood'. In the letter he explicitly castigates minimalists for their "faggot sensibility". In a way, I wasn't surprised. In another way, I was gobsmacked! Those were the days when people did not know to watch themselves, and when homophobia was considered acceptable if not *de rigueur* in the art world and in academia.

Is there a formal quality in the work that he sees as a "faggot sensibility"?

No, when you read the essay really carefully, what's so threatening to him is the opening of the work to the spectator. That's why I also have students read the minimalist artist Robert Morris's earlier series of articles titled 'Notes on Sculpture', also published in *Artforum*, starting in 1966. Morris is already saying basically everything Fried is saying, but a year before. Why does Fried even get all the credit for defining minimalism when the minimalists were already saying that the work is about changing the way we think about the art experience: that it's not an object that is there with a fixed meaning that only the art critic—coincidentally at that point, almost inevitably straight white male—gets to say what it means. It's a thing in a room and you're going to walk around it. It was important to Morris in particular that this was an embodied experience. He was reading a lot of phenomenology. He was doing some body art, even participating in dance works with Yvonne Rainer and others. He was really thinking about these questions. It's amazing.

The minimalists deserve credit among a whole bunch of artists at the time for beginning to change

what art could be—this movement was concentrated in New York at the time, but it was happening in Brazil, it was happening in Japan, in Australia. Artists were really starting to question the art as an object, and were discovering that it could be a process. It's fascinating that this is also the moment of the explosion of the civil rights and postcolonial movements—these shifts are not unconnected. Incidentally, this is also a part of the point of the book I am writing on queer performance and its deep history. Both of them are challenging white male authority. Both of them are challenging this kind of modernist idea of the subject as a kind of coherent, fully intentional being, who transmits his expression into the work of art, which can be excavated by someone else. In a way, if you look at what was happening in the art world, you see how it is totally caught up in these other transformations happening in the world.

You can also see how important art is. It is a part of everything because it is the most commodified creative medium. The visual arts is the only arts medium—compared to theatre, literature, or music—where there's an actual object that can be bought or sold, and there is a massive international market place that has only gotten bigger over time. Far from being irrelevant, making and studying visual art is at the centre of an investigation of how commodification works and of how all of our belief systems about subjectivity come out of Western Enlightenment and the modernist traditions.

Colophon

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