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A conversation with Abigail Solomon Godeau on her experience with psychoanalysis as critical tool for working with photography as a critic and curator.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau - Critic, curator, historian of photography, feminist. Professor Emerita in art history, University of California, lives and works in Paris. She is the author of *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic Histories, Institutions, and Practices* (1991), *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (1997) and *Rosemary Laing* (2012). Her essays on photography, art history, contemporary art and feminism are widely anthologized. She is currently working on two books, *The Face of Difference: Gender and Genre in Photography* and *Art Photography in the Age of Catastrophe*.

Katarzyna Bojarska - Assistant professor in the Department of Cultural Studies of the SWPS University. From 2008 to 2019, she worked in the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Co-founder of *Widok*. Since 2024 head of Center for Comparative Research on Memory Cultures (CCRM). Author of articles and translations interested in the relations of art, literature, history and psychoanalysis. She translated among others Michael Rothberg's "Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization" (Warsaw 2016). Author of a book "Wydarzenia po Wydarzeniu: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman" [Events after the Event: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman] (Warsaw 2012). Editor and one of translators of Ernst van Alphen's book "Criticism as Intervention: Art, Memory, Affect" (Krakow 2019). Recipient of numerous research grants and awards, including Fulbright, National Centre for Science, Horizon2020.

Inexhaustible Looking: Photography with Psychoanalysis

Katarzyna Bojarska: Do you remember when (and in relation to what artistic or photographic object or practice) psychoanalysis became useful for you, for your reflection and critical practice?

Abigail Solomon-Godeau: Sometime in 1984 or 1985, Linda Nochlin, Rosalyn Deutsche, and a few other friends connected to the Graduate Center at CUNY decided to organize a Freud/Lacan reading group. We were all

feminists; some of us had read some Freud, but not Lacan.

But we *had* read Juliet Mitchell

(i.e. *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*), and in 1982, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose had published *Feminine Sexuality and the école freudienne*. These were translations of several of Lacan's texts by Rose, and an introductory essay by Mitchell. Lacan was certainly very much in the [intellectual] air, especially in literary and film studies, from which I had gleaned what little I knew of Lacanian theory. Moreover, we were all temporally and theoretically past that first moment of early 1970s feminism that had rejected Freud out of hand for a number of reasons, including his notions of penis envy, castration, and his disinterest in the maternal. I don't think we understood our reading group as something that would actually affect our research and writing, but in fact it did. If Marx and certain French philosophers and theorists had been important to our thinking previously, Freud and Lacan were now important additions to our respective critical toolboxes.



In my own case, it oriented a lot of my future work, irrespective of medium, toward the problem of fetishism, in both its Marxist and psychoanalytic senses.

KB: How does psychoanalysis help approach the politics of photographic practice and/or images? Your perspective in *Photography at the Dock* was called by some critics “politico-psychoanalytic.” What do you make of it today?

AS-G: I have no idea who characterized my work in those terms, but I am delighted that someone did – it seems like a fair description.

In his work, Freud offers at least two paradigms for biography (and art history as a discipline is unthinkable without its massive production of biography). In his essays on Leonardo and Michelangelo, Freud attempts a posthumous analysis of long-dead artists with mixed results. But in other essays, such as that on Jensen’s *Gradiva*, or characters in Shakespeare, he does something far more audacious, which is to think about the unconscious of a work, not of the individual who made it. This de-centering of author or artist permits us to locate skeins of significance operating internally, synchronically, and formally within works that are themselves inscriptions of their time, place, culture, and social relations congealed as ideological formations. Your own reflections on the figure of *Gradiva*, on Lot’s [nameless] wife, and others, indicate that the terms of their representations are pre-given. Photography, by which I obviously mean analog photography, was an ideal object of inquiry, especially because its mythical transparency made it, historically, all the more potent in ideological terms. And obviously its links with fetishism, as Christian Metz argued long ago, are especially close.

KB: Did psychoanalysis serve you in your curatorial work, such as *Sexual Difference: Both Sides of the Camera* (1988),¹ with works by Peter Hujar, Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, and Francesca Woodman, among others? And, if so, how?

AS-G: Actually, the exhibition *Sexual Difference* was partially based on psychoanalytic theory, although there were other considerations involved. The exhibition meant to affirm that sexual difference was not a biological given (and now, in the light of gay, trans-, and non-conforming sexual identities, this is clearer than ever), but instead a social construction, propped on anatomical difference but far surpassing it insofar as it is grounded in the patriarchal imaginary. (Whether there exists a kind of equivalent, a matriarchal imaginary, remains entirely speculative.) What the artists in the show were variously demonstrating was how photography (and mass media in general) collectively shapes or defines the unequal order of sexual difference, providing an inexhaustible image repertoire that is readily internalized. Since the exhibition included male artists, the point was also to demonstrate that critical work in relation to sexual difference was not connected to the gender of the artist, that conventions attached to difference were contingent and mutable, and that artists were able to invent specific forms according to the changing topographies of the society of the spectacle.

KB: You once talked about photophilia (which implies a "pathological" love of photographic looking) – how do you see it today?

PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE DOCK

*Essays on Photographic History,
Institutions, and Practices*



ABIGAIL SOLOMON-GODEAU

Foreword by Linda Nochlin

AS-G: In using the term (this came up in a debate a *very* long time ago with a photography critic named Ben Lifson),² I wasn't really proposing that those who were photography lovers had a "pathological" interest in the medium. What I was referring to, rather, was an aesthetic stance, a kind of all-purpose formalism that banished all considerations of use, context, instrumentality, and of course ideology, from the field of the image. Having worked in one branch of the consciousness industry – i.e. textbook picture research – I was amazed at how photographic research could be so narrowly conceived. And the reduction of the history of the medium to (mostly) art photography was consistent with what I called the art historization of the medium. All of which gave heightened value -- aesthetic and monetary – to those forms of photography that could be visually conscripted to a photographic aesthetics *per se*.

KB: Your writings prove that the practice of art photography is somewhat complicit with the aestheticization of social and political reality. As viewers and admirers of photography-as-art, we are distracted from seeing the workings of various ideologies – they remain covered. How can we rid ourselves of the veil?

AS-G: It seems that one becomes conscious of ideology only to the extent one is alienated from it. That is very clear when we observe how feminism and its material practices have served to make the ideologies of patriarchy progressively visible, discursively and literally. Certainly, the expansion of racial and queer consciousness has exposed the intertwined mechanisms of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and other toxic effluvia of our lifeworlds. Be all that as it may, aestheticism is itself an ideological formation, as much as, for example, Marxist social art history is. But the activities of un-veiling, exposure, de-sublimation, subversion are usually conscious and intentional practices.

But it is also possible to grasp the failures of ideology, however shaped by its specific contexts, by attending to the internal contradictions, fissures, or incoherencies within cultural production.

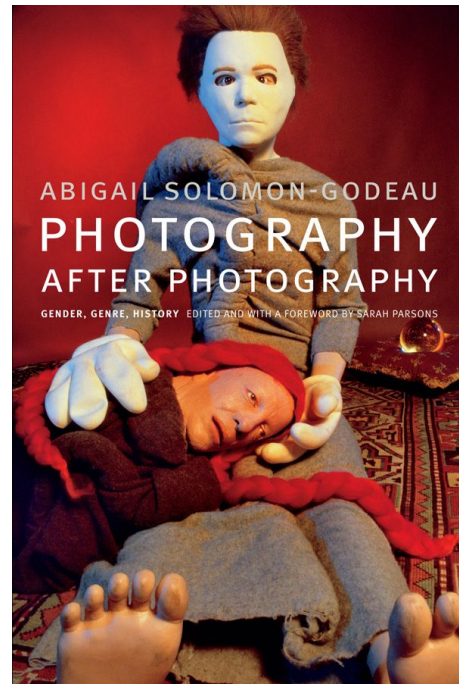
KB: What could a psychoanalytics of vision be when we think it together with photography?

AS-G: I'm not sure what is meant by a "psychoanalytics of vision." And by vision, what is being referred to? The act of viewing? Or being the subject of the Other's view? It is, however, the brain that translates optical stimuli into coherent images. Or is the term meant to refer to ways the unconscious – which is to say, the mind, not the anatomical brain – inflects what we see or think we see? Is this a reference to unconscious mechanisms of projection, introjection, or interpellation that suture us into the image field?

KB: All of these at once, I would say.

AS-G: Following Walter Benjamin, who first introduced the notion of the optical unconscious, Rosalind Krauss employed the term eponymously in her 1993 book, very much under the sign of Lacan and using as her visual objects surrealist work, especially collage production. But Lacan's speculations and Krauss's reflections are difficult to generalize or to apply to conventional photographic production, but that is not to say they cannot be expanded.

KB: What does incorporating feminism and gender into the scopic economy of photographic theory and practice result in?



AS-G: Again, I am not sure what you mean by “the scopic economy.” Is that a given entity or an economy that has been invented within the academic disciplines of photographic theory and practice? If so, are you asking how the application of analytical terms into a discursive field might or might not change the game? To me, a scopic regime refers to the ways by which power relations determine who has the right to look, who does not, how looking may be authorized or policed. This would seem relevant to your new research project. But to the degree that a scopic economy describes the rules of the game for looking, not looking, looking back, or the prohibition on looking, it well describes how inequalities on the level of social relations are further inscribed in a psychic field.

As I see it, the immediate effects of the assimilation of feminism and gender into photographic theory and practice have been several; the heightened general (but hardly disinterested) recuperation of women artists, dead or alive. The synergy here operates between and among galleries and gallerists, museums of all sizes and budgets, art history departments, the art press, the auction house, etc., etc.; the system is complex, but its component parts are ultimately connected. A positive consequence of this assimilation is its challenge to received histories and narratives. On a purely practical level, it reveals not only how many women, from the inception of the medium, were active in the profession, but how easy it was to “disappear” them from the historical record. There is certainly part of a larger awareness of the marginalization and discrimination that affects all who are not white men. What this has accomplished for living women artists and photographers, as well as artists of color, is hard to evaluate over the long term. Certainly, the Guerilla Girls – the “conscience of the art world” – do not think their work will be over anytime soon.

- 1 See: <https://wallach.columbia.edu/exhibitions/sexual-difference-both-sides-camera>.
- 2 See: Ben Lifson and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Photophilia: A Conversation about the Photography Scene," *October* vol. 16, *Art World Follies* (Spring, 1981), 102 -118.

