

Patricia Allmer, ed., *Intersections: Women Artists/Surrealism/Modernism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, 328 pp. 72 colour illus., £ 75 cloth ISBN 9780719096488

Christine Conley

Volume 42, Number 1, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040847ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040847ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Conley, C. (2017). Review of [Patricia Allmer, ed., *Intersections: Women Artists/Surrealism/Modernism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, 328 pp. 72 colour illus., £ 75 cloth ISBN 9780719096488]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 42(1), 90–93.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1040847ar>

du propos. On y constatait trop souvent la provocation suscitée par tel décolleté, les malheurs de tel élégant, ou autres infidélités et acouplements de cette société que Vigée Le Brun a mise en image. Si une exposition de portraits suscite d'emblée son lot d'informations biographiques, on en vient tout de même à se demander si la superficialité de l'ensemble n'était pas trop appuyée, comme une condition absolue pour plaire au «grand public» dans une exposition estivale destinée à rallier les foules. Au sortir des salles, une dualité marquait l'expérience du visiteur, oscillant entre le sentiment d'être époustoufflé par tant de talent, de finesse et de beauté, et celui de n'avoir pas été suffisamment nourri, comme si l'intellect en redemandait là où les yeux sont repus.

Il convient alors de se rabattre sur le catalogue de l'exposition, par ailleurs fort bien fait, pour assouvir le spectateur en mal de profondeur, qui au demeurant aura peut-être manqué la petite exposition complémentaire *La robe blanche. Comprendre nos chefs-d'œuvre*, organisée par le Musée des beaux-arts du Canada (27 mai au 25 septembre 2016). Secret trop bien gardé au premier étage du musée, cette exposition a su pallier à certaines lacunes contextuelles de la grande rétrospective. À partir d'une simple robe de mousseline blanche et de deux portraits de contemporains de Vigée Le Brun, à savoir l'Écossais Henry Raeburn et le Français Anne-Louis Girodet, cette exposition, additionnée de nombreuses estampes, caricatures et autres costumes délicats, est parvenue à dépeindre non seulement la mode féminine sous l'Empire, mais plus largement les convenances et usages d'une société française en transition, de l'Ancien Régime à la modernité du XIX^e siècle. Tout bien pesé, ces ressources (catalogue et micro-exposition) complètent habilement l'imposante et nécessaire rétrospective d'Élisabeth Louise Vigée

Le Brun, une artiste qui a su laisser une empreinte durable et distinctive dans l'empire du portrait et de la grande manière française. ¶

* In recognition of his service to the Kimbell Art Museum and his role in developing area collectors, the Board of Trustees of the Kimbell Art Foundation has dedicated this work from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Kay Kimbell, founding benefactors of the Kimbell Art Museum, to the memory of Mr. Bertram Newhouse (1883–1982) of New York City.

Annie Champagne est chargée de cours et doctorante en histoire de l'art à l'Université du Québec à Montréal
—champagne.annie@uqam.ca

2. Seule une petite exposition monographique, tenue en 1982 au Kimbell Art Museum de Fort Worth au Texas, lui avait jusqu'alors été consacrée. Voir Joseph Baillio, *Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun 1755–1842*, Catalogue de l'exposition, Fort Worth Kimbell Art Museum, Texas, 1982.

3. Seule la petite pièce attenante à la troisième salle de l'exposition, en retrait dans le parcours, se consacrait un tant soit peu aux tribulations historiques du temps. Dans le tableau thématique sur les «prescripteurs de bon goût» de l'époque de Vigée Le Brun, on pouvait constater quelques dates d'importance pour la portraitiste, dont 1789, une trop discrète mention cependant relative à un contexte capital.

4. Simone de Beauvoir dans le tome II de l'ouvrage *Le deuxième sexe* (1949—édition de 1977), p. 470, citée par Joseph Baillio, «L'itinéraire artistique et social d'Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun», *Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, catalogue de l'exposition (sous la direction de Joseph Baillio, Paul Lang et Katharine Baetjer), Réunion des Musées nationaux, Grand Palais, Paris, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, Ottawa, 2016, p. 30.

5. Pierre Charles Levesque, dans le volume 5 du *Dictionnaire des arts de peinture, sculpture et gravure* (1792), p. 149–150, cité par Joseph Baillio, *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Patricia Allmer, ed.,
Intersections: Women Artists/Surrealism/Modernism

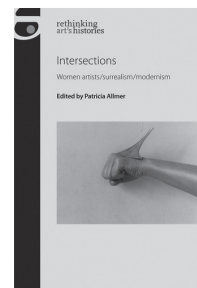
Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016

328 pp. 72 colour illus.
£ 75 cloth ISBN 9780719096488

Christine Conley

If there is a true individual *identity* I would like to find it, because like truth on discovery it has already gone.
—Leonora Carrington (1970)

In her introduction to *Intersections: Women Artists/Surrealism/Modernism*, Patricia Allmer explains that little theoretical work has examined the significant intersections (the imbrications, interpenetrations, and connections) between surrealism and modernism. This insufficiency has produced a contested field of intellectual history made all the more complicated by the largely neglected presence of women artists working within it. Allmer acknowledges the significant feminist scholarship since the 1970s that has addressed women's surrealism through critical historical work (Gloria Orenstein, Whitney Chadwick, Katharine Conley, and Mary Ann Caws, among others) and through exhibitions such as *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States* (LACMA 2012) that expanded beyond the surrealist camp in Europe. She further lauds the important contribution of Rosalind Krauss in the theorizing of modernism in the journal *October*. Yet this work, she observes, has not secured the place of women artists in major, definitive exhibitions and surveys of surrealism or modernism, nor has it dispelled the intransigent notions of “male creative authority” and “discursive power” they reinscribe. She writes, “the woman artist occupies a permanently impermanent position” and the “work of the woman artist in



modernism and surrealism comes... to resist the ‘normalizing’ and commodifying narratives of art-historical recuperation” (1).

Allmer presents the essays in *Intersections* as new modes of reading and criticism by a new generation of scholarship. Building upon extant feminist contributions, these essays approach interdisciplinary contexts of production to mark out critical intersections between surrealist and modernist aesthetic assumptions, presumably avoiding the dichotomous thinking, engendered by “women/surrealism,” that continues to justify the provisional or marginal status of women’s work. One of the questions Allmer identifies here is: why has surrealism been such a focus of scholarship on women in modernism? And why have some artists become canonical figures while others remain on the periphery? These essays aim to challenge persistent canonical constructions by attending to enduring critical blindspots (race, class, nationality, location, colonialism) and to marginal, lesser-known, atypical or later oeuvres across different generations of artists.

The essays mapping these intersections address artworks across and beyond the twentieth century, from Hélène Smith’s *Ultramaritan Landscape*, 1900, to Aube Elléouët’s collages of 2014. They are not organized chronologically but rather grouped thematically as practices: automatic, poetic, magical, combinatory, and practices of fashion, an arrangement of diverse visual art and literary production that allows for thought-provoking juxtapositions across a range of historical contexts. The book has also benefitted from the generous use of colour reproductions, especially of lesser-known works. I will address a few of those essays in which the work of intersectionality is evidently productive.

Colin Rhodes considers the automatic practices of Hélène Smith, Aloïse Corbaz, Anna Zemánková, and Unica Zürn. Despite the significance of their automatism for Breton’s formulation of surreality, they were distanced by him through a process of “othering” that left them on the

margins of the modernist avant-garde, their outsider status cemented by subsequent inclusion in *Art brut*.

In contrast, Katharine Conley’s essay on the automatic writing of Susan Hiller’s *Sisters of Menon*, 1972–79, part of a larger project called *Draw Together*, demonstrates the artist’s recuperative impulse to connect the collective actions of surrealist circles during the 1920s to those of 1970s feminism. She situates this work in relation to Hiller’s ongoing interest in spiritualism and surrealism and the role of women. There are two moments of production here: Hiller’s automatic writing from 1972 and its installation framed by a negative cross in 1979. Conley likens Hiller’s automatic writing to a “photograph taken by her body” evoking a corporeal engagement with the immediacy of transcription consistent with earlier surrealist practices such as rayograms, but more importantly, with the women surrealists’ emphasis on embodiment—automatism as experiential. Her argument is complex yet compelling in aligning the indexical traces of automatic writing vis-à-vis their symbolic meaning with the surrealist attempt to blur the boundary of unconscious and conscious processes. This surrealist strand is then entwined with the modernist connotations of the frame, considered in relation to Rosalind Krauss’s analysis of the modernist grid. Conley argues that Hiller’s use of a *negative* cruciform shape combined with the emotional state of automatism defies the fixity of the grid and moves from abstraction to the materialism of surrealist photography. I am less convinced by the second part of this argument, though I would note that the broader context of feminist art in the UK is helpful. Crucially Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*, 1973–79 (exhibited in part in 1976), presented constellations of indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs as a means of analyzing unconscious processes in the production of (maternal) identity. Here too, indexical traces were aligned

with the prelinguistic, the corporeal, and the unconscious. The potential for a broadening of Conley’s analysis, given Hiller’s later surrealist influenced work, is intriguing.

Essays on Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning explore their fascination with states of liminality to counter essentialist, modernist configurations of femininity as alterity. Regarding Carrington’s novel *The Stone Door*, written during the 1940s, Victoria Ferentinou argues that the artist mobilizes the collapsing of differences in the surrealist embrace of the marvellous to explore hybridity as a state of liminality rather than duality. Carrington reworks the theme of the “quest” in a perpetual deferral of union or resolution between gendered entities, countering then-current models of romanticism—the search for the ideal woman—embraced by Breton. Ferentinou relates Carrington’s suspension of identities in transition to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of becoming as a permeable boundary “connecting multiplicities,” and calls for a re-examination of the political and social meanings in the artist’s texts and images. Catriona McAra’s criss-cross reading of Dorothea Tanning’s soft sculpture *Emma*, 1970, with the literary character Emma Bovary positions the sculpture as an inter-medial visual object that evokes, in its material specificity, the fetishization of the female character in Gustave Flaubert’s novel and the navel as (maternal) signifier. As an example of Mieke Bal’s “theoretical object” or an art “that thinks,” Tanning’s *Emma* disrupts modernist and surrealist codes of femininity and art making.

Patricia Allmer examines Lee Miller’s documentation of textual surfaces in post-war Germany, focusing on views of an advertising pillar photographed in Bonn in April/May 1945. She draws analogies between the fragmentation and layering of words on the weathered surface of the pillar and the breakdown of Nazi discourse. An allegorical reading, after

Walter Benjamin, of these fragments evokes the many images of modernism deemed degenerate by Nazi ideology—dada and cubist collage, the surrealist decipherment of traces and chance encounters, Bauhaus typography—a palimpsestic reading of the ruins of the Reich framed as the return of the repressed, suggesting Nazi ideology's alienation from within. This is a nuanced reading that invites a different interpretive gaze than the insistent superficiality of Nazi aesthetics. Millar's gaze here is less concerned with issues of identity and desire and more with the recuperation of an aesthetics of vision associated with her own artistic milieu, surrealist and modernist, many of whom were targets of Nazi oppression. It is a vindication of these values that privileges the persistence of palimpsestic memory over brute monumentality, made all the more pointed in the nightmarish afterimage of Miller's photos of Buchenwald.

The final chapter, Emma West's essay on Elsa Schiaparelli, tackles the seemingly antithetical practices of fashion design and surrealist or modernist art. She avoids tedious debates about fashion versus art by insisting on the permeability of their categorical differences and views Schiaparelli's traversing of realms—modernist aesthetics (coded male) and the realm of fashion (coded female)—as ultimately destabilizing. In particular, two fascinating works that precede Schiaparelli's collaborations with surrealists such as Salvador Dalí are considered: the perversely fetishistic gender trouble of *Cocktail Hat*, 1934, a cap of black ostrich feathers resembling a boyish haircut, and *Belt*, c. 1938, a plastic belt configured as a scroll to evoke Classical architectural ornament. West observes that *Belt* combines the disjunctive *trompe-l'œil* effects beloved by surrealists with an undercurrent of violence through the emphatically pointed prong of the buckle that tightly cinches the

waist. West's framing of Schiaparelli's fashion statements as "cultural translations" reimagines the political valence of women's bodily display. Further, the capacity of fashion for embodied display—the performance of multiple identities—and the designer's wildly disruptive and dark-humoured bricolage (a swarm of insects on the collar of a smartly tailored suit as *memento mori*) unpin the fixity of both surrealism and modernism.

Like Allmer's earlier editorial project *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (2009), this collection underscores that women artists cannot be constrained by the historical configuration of surrealism sanctioned by André Breton. The essays in *Intersections* are rich with insights into the workings of desire in women's work and the crucial significance of a psychic elsewhere in negotiating gendered subjectivity. Overall, the fluidity of interpretation opened up by the model of intersectionality is demonstrably productive within the close reading of individual artistic strategies, though overarching conclusions remain elusive, given the sheer heterogeneity of the material spanning more than a century of art making.

One difficulty is posed by the non-chronological organization of the essays that implicitly privileges themes of surrealism over historical shifts in modernism. In some cases this aptly reflects the marginality and sense of belatedness associated with women artists. In her informative essay on the recent work of Aube Ellouët, Elza Adamowicz writes that these collages are freed from "historical" surrealism (from the publication of the first manifesto in 1924 to the official ending in 1969) and embrace "eternal" surrealism, a pan-historic liberation of the mind. Certainly, they do not provoke the kind of conceptual disjuncture, much less shock, characteristic of the earlier avant-garde and are indeed more aligned with strategies of play and transformation.

Yet, without a contextual analysis of gender and generation, Ellouët's collages seem anachronistic within the ubiquitous cut-and-paste aesthetic of twenty-first century digital remix culture. Alternatively, there is Colin Rhodes's claim that the "outsider" art of Smith, Corbaz, Zemánková, and Zürn was resistant to the "fashionable and political dictates" of art institutions, allowing for the interest such art piques in viewers today.

Still, thinking beyond these spaces of marginality, there is reason to insist on the significance of both the women's movement of the 1960s and contemporaneous challenges to modernism, for women artists working after historical surrealism. Susan Hiller, Dorothea Tanning, Birgit Jürgenssen, Helen Chadwick, and Louise Bourgeois are all discussed here in relation to works made from 1970 onwards. While the political context of the women's movement is variously apparent in these essays, the specific ways in which feminist analyses intersected with and contributed to contemporaneous debates in art is less so. The indexical turn in the context of conceptualism's privileging of language and the refusal of the indexical gesture encoded in the industrial procedures of minimalism (Dan Flavin's neon cross *Untitled (to Barbara Nüsse)*, 1971 is an apt example vis-à-vis Susan Hiller) are but two threads that could connect this work to a reconceived modernism (post-modernism) in which their visions are critical interventions, not marginalized practices. The rereading of Freud and the revisions of psychoanalytic feminism that emerged in the 1970s is another. Put another way, the 1970s mark a critical break in the contested field—surrealism/modernism—that underwrites this collection, with implications for practice that beg our attention.

These reservations aside, the fluid navigation of diverse theoretical writing and close reading of lesser-known works makes this volume both thought provoking and pleasurable. I am left with the afterimage of Robert

Mapplethorpe's 1968 photograph of Louise Bourgeois, discussed in Guy Reynolds's essay, in which she confronts us with a knowing grin. Clasped securely under one arm is her sculpture *Fillette*, a constellation of multiple signifiers—phallus/female/meat—emblematic of the complexity of desire in these essays. ¶

Dr. Christine Conley is an art historian and independent curator with expertise in issues of feminism and gender, the ethics of difference, cultural translation, political violence, and armed conflict.
—cconley@geotext.ca

Sarah Bassnett
Picturing Toronto. Photography and the Making of a Modern City

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016

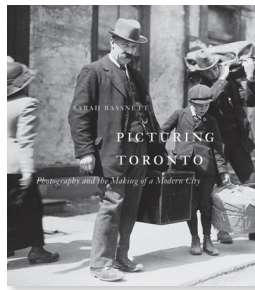
208 pp. 84 illus.
\$ 54 cloth ISBN 9780773546714

Jill Delaney

“Photography transformed modern life.” The first sentence in Sarah Bassnett's book, *Picturing Toronto. Photography and the Making of a Modern City*, reads like a prosecutor's opening statement to a jury. Wasting no time, the author lays down the entire premise of her case in four words, and follows it up with a series of case studies and a final pitch to the jury. This is a case that photographic historians have been pleading for decades: photography has not acted simply as a passive recorder illustrating the development of modernity, it has been an active protagonist in that process.¹ Bassnett presents a series of convincing illustrations of that agency, while adding to the history of the role photography played in the development of the city of Toronto in the early twentieth century. Overall, the book is a welcome addition to both the history of photography in Canada and to the more broadly based critical thinking about the roles played by different photographic

genres throughout its history.² The author states that the book is an attempt to bridge the gap between the conventional divisions in historical scholarship: photographic historians' use of history as context for the further understanding of the image, and historians' use of photographs as illustrations of the historical event.

Theoretically, much of the analysis of the city and the photograph is based on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, while drawing on now classic sources such as Allan Sekula, John Tagg, and Victor



Burgin for their ideological parsing of photography, but also on more recent work on “the affective turn”—the study of the effects of photography on the viewer. The main thesis of the book is that, under the “liberal project” of Toronto, photography was employed by its various creators and users to constitute modern urban subjects, and more specifically, self-regulating modern subjects. Photography is understood as a particularly powerful discursive tool in this regard, largely through its capacity to construct “truth” for a variety of liberal objectives in the building of the capitalist city.

The chapters in the book act as a series of case studies, grouped into two larger sections. The first section is concerned with the use of photography in the shaping of the built environment, addressing first the use of survey photographs for the construction of the Bloor Viaduct, and secondly the use of photographs by proponents of the City Beautiful

Movement, although more in Chicago than Toronto. The second section focuses on the constitution of the urban liberal subject, analyzing the use of photography of The Ward (a central “slum”) by urban reformers and newspapers, while also considering how different photographic genres have contributed to the formation of the modern liberal subject and the modern city.

In the introduction, Bassnett lays out her overriding thesis and various intersecting terms of analysis, defines modernity and photography's place within it, and summarizes photography's relation to liberalism, urban reform, and governmentality, as well as the various approaches to photographic history both in general and in Canada. She characterizes modernity by the familiar parameters set out by Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Georg Simmel, with the modern city posited as a space of constant transition, alienation, and fear. Bassnett argues that liberalism, a key feature of modernity, “paradoxically operates through the production of freedom and the corresponding constitution of self-regulating subjects” (4). Photography is positioned as one of the several rational modern technologies (along with surveys, statistics, and cartography) used to produce a rational, governable city. However, Bassnett also recognizes that it plays a major part in stoking the middle class's own anxieties, especially when it is used to sensationalize “the other” in the media.

Chapter One examines the photographs taken by Arthur Goss, Toronto's first official municipal photographer, as part of the survey of properties to be affected by the construction of the Bloor Viaduct, in order to demonstrate how photography can be a “rational instrument” in the objectification and commodification of both the built and natural environments. During his tenure, between 1911 and 1940, Goss produced around 26,000 photographs for various departments within the municipal government, including