

Visual and literary narratives of dissent

Unframing women and representation

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Abstract

This article examines the concepts of ‘frame’ and ‘framing’ as key *topoi* in theoretical debates in feminism and intertextuality. In feminist debates around the ‘frame’, the emphasis is on the dialogue between framing and unframing, fixing and unfixing, which rejects standardization and critiques the cultural representation of women. From this perspective, the article then provides a comparative analysis of a visual and a literary narrative. Isak Dinesen’s short story ‘The Blank Page’ (1955) is a disquieting narrative about the erasure of identity and silence, and a powerful gendered commentary on the making of history/*her*story. Dinesen’s story is examined in relation to a visual composition by the Portuguese artist Paula Rego, ‘Oratório’/ ‘Oratory’ (2009), in which a set of opposites creates a powerful dialogue of tacit silences and subliminal discourses, against the erasure of woman’s voice. Both narratives, the visual and the literary, provide a similar challenge to fixed codes of representation while transgressively ‘unframing’ women and thus ‘reframing’ the silences of history.

Keywords: Isak Dinesen, frame, feminist critique, intertextuality, Paula Rego, unframing

‘Instead of non-interference and specialization, there must be interference, crossing of borders and obstacles, a determined attempt to generalize exactly at those points where generalizations seem impossible to make.’

(Edward Said 1982: 24)

‘Who, then, she continues, tells a finer tale than any of us? Silence does. And where does one read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? Upon the blank page.’

(Isak Dinesen 1991: 100)



Framing feminism or feminism unframed?

It is not by coincidence that the concept of 'frame'/'framing' appears in the title of three influential and fairly recent feminist volumes: *Framing Feminism, Art and Women's Movement 1970–1985* (Parker and Pollock 1987); *Unframed. Practices and Politics of Women's Contemporary Painting* (Betterton 2004); and *Feminism Reframed: Reflections on Art and Difference* (Kokoli 2008).

What is so crucial about the concept of 'frame', repeated (in a number of variables) in each of the three titles? What does it signify? What meanings and subtleties does it indicate in relation to the definition of feminism as a movement, its history and major changes throughout the two and a half decades that separate the first from the third volume? A reflection upon each of the three Introductions of the volumes by the respective editors is illuminating on the differences and shifts of paradigm regarding feminism and its recent history, and raises important questions in the context of a retrospective and a prospective of feminism's concerns, conceptualizations and changing territories of inquiry and engagement, especially regarding visual culture. It is not the purpose of this article to review at length the three volumes, but rather to propose a reflection on them that will provide a starting point to help us contextualize, in relation to feminist critique, the meaning and impact of the two case-studies I will discuss below: a literary and a visual narrative by two ground-breaking female artists, Isak Dinesen and Paula Rego.

In the Preface of the earlier volume, *Framing Feminism, Art and Women's Movement 1970–1985*, the editors claim that 'Whereas the majority of political movements have employed art and artists for propaganda purposes, feminism has worked to transform art – and artists themselves' (Parker and Pollock 1987: xiii). The volume has a historic purpose, mapping the history of women's art and women's criticism in dialogue with feminism as both 'a catalyst and a component of a broad front' (1987: xiv), and making sure that 'feminist art groups are not hidden from history' (1987: xvi). Hence the title of the Introduction: 'Fifteen years of feminist action: from practical strategies to strategic practices'. The concept of 'frame' (as in the title *Framing Feminism*) has here a positive and proactive meaning, signalling both that feminism as an emancipatory movement was definitely out of the closet, and the opening up and promotion of new territories of enquiry through its global critical commitment to the agency of women. The binomial *Art and Difference* is here in evidence, as feminist art history and feminist art criticism had greatly expanded in Europe and the U.S. throughout the 1980s.

Rosemary Betterton's collection, *Unframed. Practices and Politics of Women's Contemporary Painting*, has its critical eye set on women's art as an established field of scholarship, as the title indicates. The concepts of 'framing'

and ‘unframing’ engage here in a dialogue (rather than antinomy), as can be gathered from Betterton’s own Introduction, tellingly titled ‘Unframing women’s painting’. Betterton claims that her aim is to redress the balance between contemporary practices and politics of women who paint and to rebut two propositions – that both painting and feminism are dead – by exploring the current state of making and thinking about painting by women. It aims to reclaim a space for different practices of women’s painting and to assert that these are important if we are concerned with ‘the current meanings of both art and gender’ (2004: 1). Framing and unframing are not here set against each other in a dichotomy, as might be at first inferred, but rather the second term adds a nuance to the former. This precludes a deterministic and fixed conceptualization, and favours a debate on ‘both art and gender’. The same idea is proposed by the use of the plural in the title (*Practices and Politics of Women’s Contemporary Painting*).

But surely it is the third collection that is the most challenging. In the Introduction to the 2008 volume, *Feminism Reframed. Reflections on Art and Difference*, entitled ‘Looking on, Bouncing Back’, Alexandra Kokoli claims that the volume ‘addresses the ongoing dialogue between feminism, art history and visual culture from contemporary scholarship perspectives’ with a focus on ‘the emergence of new interdisciplinary areas of investigation, including notably that of visual culture’ (2008: 1). The collection proposes a re-evaluation of the impact of the ‘indisputable transformations’ that took place in recent decades, by achieving a balance between past and present both in feminist thought and practice around art and visual culture since the 1970s, ‘highlighting continuities as well as points of disjunction’ (2008: 1). The concept ‘reframed’, as in the title *Feminism Reframed*, means here an open movement of simultaneous ‘homage and critique’ of the announced feminist interventions and revisions of the art canon, its agents, locations, spectators and activists, as stated by the editor. Most importantly it engages explicitly with the collection edited two decades earlier by Parker and Pollock, *Framing Feminism, Art and Women’s Movement 1970–1985*. The 1987 volume was ‘clearly of its time’, as claimed by the editor, in that it bears the awareness of an impending transitoriness translated in the consideration that prospectively ‘feminism will be considered “in need” of other reframings’ (1987: 13), thus endorsing the notion that fluidity and becoming are inherent in the inquiry of feminism in the visual arts, as in other fields.

In the context of Kokoli’s collection it becomes clear that the dialogue between framing and unframing carries the dual meaning of fixing and unfixing as part of a continuum within an ongoing debate, a synergy and a dialogue that rejects fixed meanings and standardization. In this same volume,

Griselda Pollock, in an important essay entitled ‘What is it that Feminist Interventions Do? Feminism and Difference in Retrospect and Prospect’ (Kokoli 2008: 248–80), an essay which functions as the key to the whole collection, asks whether ‘feminism is not synonymous with simply collecting and exhibiting works by *women* artists [but] also implies a shifting of paradigms, including going beyond notions of gender (men and women artists) and engaging with difference: sexual, ethnic, cultural, geographical, generational, orientational and so on?’ (Kokoli 2008: 251).

Pollock raises a crucial question which she leaves unanswered: if feminism and feminist work is ‘transgressive of existing institutions and structures in which nonetheless it has to intervene, and to which it should make a radical difference’ (2008: 255), the issue remains ‘how to reframe that difference so that the price of the “institutionalisation” of feminism, or the “writing of feminism’s history” does not effectively erase the feminist effect, or render [it] invisible through a polite and disfiguring inclusion’ (2008: 255).

In this assumption, the ‘reframing’ of feminism is not an essential or static category, but rather implies a self-reflexive analysis, ethically and politically situated, accounting for a double movement: feminism as ‘historical retrospect’ (that is, Donna Haraway, Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva’s contribution) and as a constant projection into the future, thus signifying a ‘poiesis to come’, a ‘becoming’ (2008: 277).

The concept of ‘frame’ in the context of intertextuality

As a second referent crucial to this debate, I propose that the notion of frame is understood as inseparable from the concept of intertextuality. This opens up another huge debate – the field of intertextuality is rich and challenging – but I will focus on the objects of study: Dinesen’s ‘Blank Page’ and Rego’s ‘Oratório’. Both ‘narratives’ weave deep intertextual dialogues with women’s history and women’s centuries-old untold, silenced stories.

The conceptual implications of the term ‘intertextuality’ have been exhaustively considered by many reputed critics (from Barthes and Kristeva to Derrida). In the context of painting and photography I will refer to two essays published in a special issue of the journal *Style* (1988), on the subject of *Visual Poetics*: Norman Bryson’s ‘Intertextuality and Visual Poetics’ and Linda Hutcheon’s ‘Fringe Interference. Postmodern border tensions’. As stated by Bryson, a movement towards unframing is essential to promote intertextuality and the interpenetration of images in the context of painting. In his words:

Within the boundary of the individual image, each glance of the viewer across its surface reflects the sum of previous glances upon the present image, as well

as all the images to come; the image before each glance has the structure of a hologram. [...] Interpenetrated by past and future images, its frame is dissolved and crossed through principles of mutual entering, mutual reflection, mutual containment [...] In the case of the image, intertextuality is established by dissolving the frame around the work. (Bryson 1988: 186–87)

He adds: 'To think of paintings as mutually interpenetrating is to discover in the realm of the image the same phenomenon of mobile intertextuality made familiar to us by Barthes and Derrida in the field of literary criticism. The logistics are indeed similar in both domains' (Bryson 1988: 187).

In turn, with a focus on photography, Hutcheon writes about 'photographic "fringe" constructions that combine the visual and the verbal, mass media and high art, artistic practice and aesthetic theory' (Hutcheon 1988: 299). She defines these 'fringe interferences' as a 'play with the border tensions of theory, politics and art' and claims that they instigate a dual mode of 'complicity and critique', a polemical, but not necessarily invalid, characteristic of postmodernism (Hutcheon 1988: 320). It is important to bear these considerations in mind in the context of the present discussion around the concept of frame.

Finally, in articulation with the concept of intertextuality as an interpenetration of the fields of knowledge and the view of a global 'politics of interpretation', I make use of the concept of 'interference' as championed by Edward Said in his celebrated essay 'Opponents, audiences and constituencies and community'.¹ This essay was published in an issue of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to 'The politics of interpretation' (September 1982), edited and introduced by W. J. T. Mitchell. The claim that interpretation needs 'unpacking' and historicizing is powerfully made by both critics; it is a 'vigilant' mode that prevents critical scholarship from 'sink[ing] back into the murmur of mere prose' (Said 1982: 25–26). Hence Said's demand that 'Instead of non-interference and specialization, there must be interference, crossing of borders and obstacles, a determined attempt to generalize exactly at those points where generalizations seem impossible to make' (Said 1982: 24). The concepts of intertextuality and interference resonate with each other, as both endorse a performative and 'vigilant' mode of reading.

Furthermore, within the context of postcolonial critique, the notion of frame is intimately related with the concepts of 'inbetweenness' and liminality developed by Homi Bhabha (1994), to signify the close articulation of spatiality and temporality. This argument was further developed in an essay by Richard Brock, 'Framing theory. Towards an ekphrastic postcolonial methodology'; Brock argued for its strategic duality (spatial and temporal) as a 'model for postcolonial discourse': 'the notion of the frame, I argue, offers a powerful

conceptual tool for negotiating the operational difficulties of such models of postcolonial criticism, for which neither their originators nor their more recent critics are able to fully account' (Brock 2011: 102). Brock adds: 'Yet, my suggestion of the frame as a model for postcolonial discourse theory in particular rests on a duality, unique to the object of the frame, which situates it always at the boundary between spatiality and temporality' (2011: 104).

I will now analyse the two 'narratives' discussed in this article, setting them not in confrontation with each other but rather in dialogue. Both are powerful tales of womanhood and femininity, symbolically framed / unframed / reframed, in the text and on the canvas, through the transgressive voices of two women artists – the Danish writer, Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen) and the Portuguese painter, Paula Rego. Echoes of Dinesen's tale are strongly audible in Rego's composition, 'Oratório', despite the spatial and temporal distance that separates both works, for their 'frame', as we shall see, is identical.

'The Blank Page' – Framing/ unframing women

Isak Dinesen's well-known poetic story, which belongs to the collection *Last Tales* (1955), starts, as do many traditional tales, with an old woman sitting at the ancient city gate who makes her living by telling stories.² The old woman begins: 'High up in the blue mountains of Portugal there stands an old convent for sisters of the Carmelite order'. In olden times the convent was prosperous but now it survived mostly due to the exquisite linen the sisters grew and manufactured at the convent: 'The linen of the Convento Velho [Old Convent] draws its true virtue from the fact the very first linseed was brought home [to Portugal] from the Holy Land itself by a crusader' (1981: 102). No wonder that the bridal sheets of the Portuguese princesses were made from such a fine cloth. And, so we are told, in appreciation for its good service, the Convent held the privilege of receiving by return the central piece of the bridal sheet which 'bore witness to the honour of a royal bride' (103). These pieces of cloth were framed in gold and hung on the walls of the main gallery of the Convent, besides a plate of pure gold on which was engraved the name of the princess: Donna Christina, Donna Ines, Donna Jacintha Lenora, Donna Maria (103). For this very reason, 'in days of old' princesses of Portugal and foreign countries would go to the Convento Velho on a pilgrimage, which was 'both sacred and secretly gay', to stare thoughtfully at these framed 'old canvases'. Each had a story to tell; 'from the markings on the canvas, omens were drawn', the narrator explains. Some omens were fulfilled throughout the life of each lady; others were not. But the most enigmatic, and the most stared at canvas in the long gallery of the Convent, was one that was totally blank:

The frame of it is as fine and as heavy as any, and as proudly as any carries the golden plate with the royal crown. *But*, on this one plate no name is inscribed, and the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner – a blank page. (1981: 104)

This gilt-framed canvas tells the story of a woman who, despite great secrecy, was ‘loyally’ put up on the wall, to pass on the evidence of her own particularity. Not surprisingly, it is before this blank canvas that every storyteller becomes dumb and every princess of Portugal, her bridesmaids and maids of honour, ‘most often stood still’ (105). The echo of the old story-teller’s words remains:

Who, then, she continues, tells a finer tale than any of us? Silence does. And where does one read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? *Upon the blank page*. [...] When a royal and gallant pen, in the moment of its highest inspiration, has written down its tale with the rarest ink of all – where, then, may one read a still deeper, sweeter, merrier and more cruel tale than that? *Upon the blank page*. (1981: 100) [my emphasis]

What ‘silence’ is this story unveiling? What secret life? What erased identity is it exhibiting? First, by framing the untold story and then unframing publicly its transgression, silence is paradoxically made audible and the blank page is made to speak through the very gesture that aims to silence it. As the narrator warns us, ‘Where the storyteller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly, loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness’ (1981: 100). Imprinted on the blank page is the story of a woman’s life, unframed. It is through the eyes of each viewer, each woman who bemusedly pauses before the blank canvas and constructs a mute dialogue with it, her own mind crowded with hundreds of other images, that ‘the frame around it dissolves’, as recalled by Bryson (Bryson 1988 186). The blank canvas is made to speak, enacting a new form of embodied intertextuality and intratextuality.

Susan Gubar, in a celebrated essay, ‘The Blank Page and Issues of Female Creativity’ (1981), elaborates a reading of Dinesen’s tale from a hermeneutical and a comparatist point of view within the frame of gender politics as an illustration of the misogynist paradigms of creativity in the history of culture.³ This was a pioneering and deeply influential intervention for the construction of a matrilineal genealogy of women’s writing and for establishing feminist scholarship. Gubar argues that the metaphorization of feminine creativity is the central trope in the tale:

‘The Blank Page’ addresses this question with brilliant clarity. This story can be used to illustrate *how woman’s image of herself as text and artefact has affected*

her attitudes toward her physicality and how these attitudes in turn shape the metaphors through which she imagines her creativity. (Gubar 1989: 295) [my emphasis]

Gubar illustrates her point by means of numerous incursions in the history of literature and culture, from Ovid to Chaucer and from Shakespeare to the moderns, James, Pound and Eliot, among others. She exemplifies how the myth of masculine creativity and the objectivization of women has impregnated women's own vision of their subjectivity as inexistent; women envisage themselves not as the artistic creator but the art object itself, woman is the 'text' (the 'blank page') upon which the word is written. Thus, Gubar argues, the 'attraction of women writers to personal forms of expression like letters, autobiographies, confessional poetry, diaries, and journals points up the effect of a life experienced as an art or an art experienced as a kind of life' (1989: 299).

The transgression represented and embodied in Dinesen's tale is manifold. It allows the reader an ironical re-visitation of collective cultural memory – womanhood framed by domesticity, law and tradition – which, through a performative gesture, it literally exhibits, while making the proposition that a woman's body, its blood and fluids, is the first and sometimes 'the only accessible medium for self-expression', as Gubar sustains (1989: 296). She further argues, 'Not only are artist and art object physically linked but also the canvases in the nun's gallery are a direct response to the princesses' private lives' (296). One could nevertheless reclaim the framed 'blank page', and its transgressive unframing of an erased identity, as an act of empowerment and defiance for the otherwise mute existence of these women, to whom each viewer fabricates a face and a story, beyond the opaqueness of each canvas and the gold-plated royal inscription. Gubar wrote this essay as early as 1981, over thirty years ago. Her premonitory words are still with us today: 'We are only just beginning to read the patterns and trace the figures in what all too recently has been viewed as nothing but the blank pages of women's cultural and literary history' (308).

Paula Rego's 'Oratório': Women framed/unframed

The centrality of the body is, to date, the main *topos* of women's creativity and is crucial in contemporary women's art. Contemporary feminism claims that the need for a situated politics, a 'politics of location', is inseparable from the mapping of new feminine corpographies.⁴ Today, feminism is still at odds with this issue, which, as Judith Butler has argued, has shifted from 'writing the body' (the concept of *écriture féminine* postulated by French feminists in the 1960s and 1970s,⁵ and Virginia Woolf's symbolic killing of the 'Angel in

the house’) to ‘inscribing the materiality of the female body’ (Butler 1993: ix). The awareness of the materiality or corporeality of the feminine has 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.

In the third and last section of my article, I propose to focus on a visual composition, which could also be called an installation, by the Portuguese artist Paula Rego, exhibited at her museum in Cascais (founded in 2009 and named the Casa das Histórias [House of Stories]).⁶ I am referring to the piece ‘Oratório’⁷ (Fig. 1), a work which, I argue, is a mirror image of Dinesen’s story ‘The Blank Page’. It shares with the story a central trope, silence, as the metaphorization of the female body and the erasure of identity, while nevertheless offering the viewer an overcrowded scenario with puppets as surrogate representations of human beings, in this sense, the inverse of the nudity and tacit mutism of ‘The Blank Page’. The two share the same paradoxical universe of denial and possibility, framed by repression and censorship, while both exhibit an identical performative ‘unframing’ gesture where the reader/viewer is actively called to participate. Once again, we must



Figure 1. Paula Rego, *Oratório*.

refer to the concepts of interference, interpenetration, interweaving and interlocking of images and texts, as described in the first section of this article, deeply anchored in interdisciplinarity and intertextuality, and in the global understanding of a hermeneutics that, as Said argues, rejects the 'silent norm' of the autonomy of fields and the 'purity' of disciplines as essential categories existing, as it were, in a void of extreme specialization (Said 1982: 12–13). Instead, along with Said, we envisage an interpretive gesture that rejects deafness to the dialogue among fields and disciplines, as if they were 'antagonist and immune to each other', and moreover involves social awareness or, to put it in his powerful phrase, a gesture that calls for a 'vigilant form of interpretation' grounded on the 'value of responsibility' (24–25).

In view of these present case-studies, set within the frame (and the 'unframing') of contemporary feminism, I recall Pollock's urge for a shift of paradigm and a redefinition of feminism as a

series of interlocking practices of making, analysis, historical revision, theoretical expansion, and astute and continuing analysis of ever-changing socio-political and cultural situations [...] feminist work is transgressive of existing institutions and structures in which it nonetheless has to intervene, and to which it should make a radical difference. (Kokoli 2008: 255)

In Portugal, the composition 'Oratório' gave its name to the exhibition inaugurated in July 2011 at Rego's 'Casa das Histórias'.⁸ The piece faced the visitor, centre stage in the main room of the Gallery, an exuberant introit – disquieting and moving – to the whole series of images, prints and paintings which followed in the remaining rooms of the House. Space is here a crucial issue. The majestic size of this closet-oratory, about three metres high, standing solo in the large room, faces the viewer with its panels wide open, like any other sacred triptych unveiling its mysteries. Only here these are profane mysteries, exposing women and children in deep suffering, uncovering private scenes of violence and victimization and making them shockingly public.

As is well known, Portugal is historically a Catholic country. An oratory, as described by Helena de Freitas, curator of the exhibition, is a familiar object of devotion, often to be found in the homes of traditional families. It performs 'a dual religious and domestic function and establishes a closer and more direct relationship between the home and the divine. Saints are the most commonly found figures, small sculptures created to protect the families, placed on these intimate altars' (Freitas 2011). At the very heart of the profane triptych, the three dimensional models created by the artist as proto-sculptures create a grotesque universe of extreme despondency and abandon, in a direct evocation of the topic that had been proposed to the artist by the London

Foundling Museum: abandoned children in institutional care. This sacrificial leitmotif is clearly recognizable in Rego's previous work as stemming from other sources of inspiration, predominantly taken from the British and the Portuguese literary canon (Dickens, Brontë, Camilo Castelo Branco and Eça de Queiroz). Moreover, the staged scenes issue from Rego's own 'interior theatre',⁹ re-visitations of her recurrent themes and obsessions, where spectral images from her earlier compositions, such as 'Jane Eyre', 'Father Amaro' or 'Maria Moisés', depicting rape, infanticide and child abuse, reappear repeatedly – phantasmagorias in a performative display – as disclaimers of human cruelty, hypocrisy and ultimate abjection.

In the background of this profane 'Oratory' (as if it were the backstage of a performance), in the same main room of the 'House of Stories', a subsequent series of images is unveiled before the viewer, singular episodes of a dramatization previously announced as brief thematic soliloquies. Each image stages a singular horror, the human predator in all its figurations, from direct horror and passive complicity, to agonistic fear.

The viewer proceeds to another room, but the open shutters of the 'Oratory' do not close up; conversely, their unveiled / unframed mysteries lurk in every corner, assume new proportions and new shapes that are successively conjured up by the artist, as if the bleak visions of the 'Oratory' were successively revisited and re-enacted in a palimpsestic narrative creating a dense hypertextual chain, through plates from the 'Untitled' series on clandestine abortion, 'The Life of Mary', 'Father Amaro', to engravings and prints from the series on 'Virtues and Vice: Love, Mercy, Disdain, Shame, Envy, Sloth'. These and many other images follow each other in the adjoining rooms, as if emerging of their own accord from the nightmare of the 'Oratory', as if they were its legal dwellers.

Here again echoes of Dinesen's tale strike a vibrant chord: the silence, secrecy and mutism of 'The Blank Page' made audible through Rego's palette into a powerful visual imagery of womanhood, whose grotesque figurations loudly unframe as a narrative of despondency, humiliation and grief the viewer cannot fail to read/see. This section is part of a second exhibition within the former, whimsically named 'The body has more elbows', a phrase used by Rego in her characteristic humorous tone in direct reference to the hardship of working from the model, as quoted by the curator, Ana Ruivo:

This [painting in the early 1980s] was so easy to do! And so quick. It was like squeezing your head and everything came out. I held the paintbrush, started at one point, and went ahead, until the bottom. Now it's more difficult, working with a model. *The body has more elbows*.¹⁰

It is, however, important to stress a point of cleavage at the heart of Rego's 2011 exhibition at the 'House of Stories': another large, solo composition in an otherwise bare room, authored by Vic Willing (Rego's late husband), named 'Place' (Fig. 2). It creates a powerful dialogue with Rego's exhibited work. 'Place' is an oil triptych dated 1976–1978 which stages a 'vivid scenery', in Willing's words, of the identity of the artist, his physical and mental space, represented through a few personal objects of his daily routine: a bag, a mug, a plant, a deckchair. Rego comments: "Place" is without doubt the best thing Vic ever did. It is complex, it has all manner of clues in it, it has more of the things he did well than any other painting and shows many aspects of his work'.¹¹ 'Place' strikes the viewer as a clear evocation of Willing's presence in Rego's pictorial (as well as emotional) universe. 'The Intellect and Hope and Travel and Sex', a picture 'about exploring [...] the centre balanced against the two other parts' (Rego 2010: 158–59), is how the artist unravels the primordial meaning of 'Place' and the reason why it was chosen to figure in this show. Rego's comments testify to the centrality of the dialogue staged between the two main pieces exhibited, 'Oratório' and 'Place', both works issuing from the 'interior theatre' of each artist, both excavating time and memory, uncovering and recovering them each in a specific way. Both works



Figure 2. Vic Willing, *Place*.

are excessive in their own right, one overcrowded, the other bare and neat. They share an excessive dimension and impose themselves solo in the large empty space of the rooms where they are set as pivotal figurations. Their subject-matter is excessive too, foregrounding in multifarious ways a ritualistic projection of opposites: loneliness, fear and desire, absence and possibility.

Women ‘reframed’?

Rego and Dinesen’s ‘narratives’ are, in many senses, mirror images of each other, antithetical only on the surface. The unframing and reframing processes of womanhood in which each of them is engaged is blatantly exposed beneath their apparent dissymmetry. Despite the spatial and temporal distance that separates them, they share a vision of femininity and womanhood that rejects essentialisms and stereotypes and both creators project a similar utopian dimension in their work, a vision of femininity, retold through the voice of each as a ‘world of becoming’. Rego voices it powerfully in her matter of fact, unsettling manner:

My pictures are pictures that are done by a woman artist. The stories I tell are the stories that women tell. If art becomes genderless what is it – a neuter? That’s no good, is it? [...] Because there are stories to be told that have never been told. It has to do with such deep things that haven’t been touched on – women’s experience.¹²

Thus, we return to the debate of whether feminism has indeed historically succeeded as an emancipatory movement that positively ‘unframes’ women and their representations by means of its critical commitment to the agency of women and the unveiling of tacit silences, repressed memories and censored desires. Crucial as it is, the writing of women’s history and the writing of feminism’s history is largely articulated through a dialogical process of ‘framing’/ ‘unframing’ women and their social, cultural, political and aesthetic representations. However controversial, unstable and ambivalent at times, this is a process which should signify a constant projection into the future, a ‘poiesis to come, a becoming’ and as such, one that necessarily calls for a prospective retrospect (Pollock 2008: 277).

It was not my intention to wrap up my argument and ‘hand you after an hour’s discourse a nugget of pure truth’, as Woolf wrote in the conclusion of one *A Room of One’s Own* (Woolf 1929 [1981]: 5). With a discussion of these two ‘narratives of dissent’, I hope to have contributed to the fostering of dialogue between the disciplines, to challenge the porosity of fields of knowledge, and to join with those who deem critical scholarship to exist ‘beyond the murmur of mere prose’.

Notes

1. See Said (1982: 1–26) and Mitchell (1982). The concept of ‘interference’ should also be understood in articulation with the notion of ‘worldliness’, crucial in Said’s conceptual framework and discussed in different contexts, namely in many of the essays collected in Said (2001).
2. Dinesen ([1955] 1991: 99–105).
3. Gubar (1981), reprinted in Showalter (1989: 292–313).
4. This section of my article is further developed in Macedo (2003: 71–86).
5. For example, Hélène Cixous urges in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (‘Le rire de la méduse’, 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’ (Cixous 1981: 250); see also Irigaray (1977) and Kristeva (1974).
6. Paula Rego is a leading contemporary artist. Portuguese by birth, she lives and works in London. Amongst the many critical assessments she has received over the years, the following offer a perspective of her work in articulation with issues of gender politics and the historical context of Portugal during and after Salazar’s dictatorship: Macedo (2010), Lisboa (2003), Rosengarten (2009).
7. ‘Oratory’, a ‘multi-media-work’ (Rosenthal 2010), was the composition Rego created following the invitation she received from the London Foundling Museum (previously, the ‘Foundling Hospital’, an eighteenth-century institution that took under its care abandoned children). This exhibition took place between February and April 2010, before the Lisbon exhibition. Rego’s work was exhibited alongside that of two young British artists, Tracey Emin and Mat Collishaw.
8. Helena de Freitas argues concerning this exhibition: ‘In this recent cycle of works, based on the dialogue that is created between drawing and sculpture, the artist deliberately seeks to stress the sense of ritual and to make the narratives much denser’ (Freitas 2011: unnumbered).
9. ‘Painting is practical but it’s magical as well. Being in this studio *is like being inside my own theatre*’ (‘Paula Rego in conversation with John McEwen’, catalogue of the exhibition *Paula Rego*, Serpentine Gallery, 15 Oct.–20 Nov. 1988: 41–48; my emphasis). See John McEwen, ‘Letter from London. Paula Rego’ (1981: 58–59). In his review, McEwen stresses the vitality of Rego’s art, its theatrical quality ‘with much humour and not a trace of whimsy [...]. No sides are taken, no conclusions drawn’ (1981: 59).
10. Paula Rego in conversation with Ana Ruivo (at the time consultant of Casa das Histórias and author of the Introduction to the exhibition catalogue), ‘The body has more elbows’ (June 2011: unnumbered; my emphasis).

11. Rego, 'Place' text in the exhibition catalogue 'Victor Willing uma retrospectiva', Lisbon, Fundação Paula Rego/Casa das Histórias (2010: 158–59).
12. Rego, in Roberts (1997: 85).

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