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Writing from the heart

Griselda Pollock

Because trauma cannot be simply remembered, it cannot simply be ‘confessed’; it must be testified to, in a struggle shared between a speaker and a listener to recover something the speaking subject is not – cannot be – in possession of. Insofar as feminine existence is in fact a traumatized existence, feminine autobiography *cannot be* a confession. It can only be a testimony to survival. And like other testimonies to survival, its struggle is to testify at once to life and to the death – the dying – the survival has entailed.

(Shoshana Felman¹)

Preface

In the early 1990s, I experimented with performance, video and book design, to put into practice what I retrospectively recognise as the radical innovations of Rozsika (Rosie) Parker, who initiated feminist art history in Britain. She had invented for herself and others a way of writing and reading with life, death and survival. This is what constituted a *feminist writing otherwise*.

Rozsika Parker taught me that art can, must matter, and art that matters is often about what is most serious in women’s lives. Thus ‘writing from the heart’ concerns affects, traumas and their histories that, in being lived, are, in effect, survived. Although aesthetic practices – and I shall place *art writing* alongside more formal art making practices – are not therapeutic as they do not aim at a cure, they can contribute to cultural transformation both subjectively and collectively.

In ‘The question of autobiography and the bond of reading’, Shoshana Felman explores the feminist search for a voice that is at once singular – this woman’s voice – while generating solidarity among women, who in a sense become ‘women’ only in the reciprocal bond of reading the voiced woman/the story of the other. A community is formed by transgressing social and psychological boundaries policed by silencing women’s voices or never giving women access to the instruments of self-inscription and hence mutual discovery. Felman argues, however, that the personal is pre-formed by the psycho-social assumption of identities and formations of subjectivity shaped by the cultures in which we come to be ‘women’ and which offer no spaces prepared for the selves ‘we’ may wish otherwise to become. Thus to find our own narratives or form our own voices is a continuing work because ‘none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography’.²

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In Felman's wake, I have constantly worked on the assumption that we lend our own lives to the reading of cultural or visual texts which, in turn, provide forms and figures through which we come to grasp the present, but shapeless, nature of affects and as-yet-unfigured memories. Felman's epigraph provides a belated, more theoretical formulation of what I realised I had learnt through working with Rosie Parker.³

Testifying to survival, or matters of life and death

It was the first week of November 2010. I was in Lodz, Poland. A survey of hitherto little exhibited or unknown works by Polish women artists had been assembled by a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Lodz. A small symposium was being held in a beautiful villa. I was invited to speak about the gaze, seeing, looking, being seen, performed by this collection of little known paintings by women from the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries in Poland.

To speak about feminism's project in art history thirty years after Rozsika Parker and I had finally brought into the world our long-term project titled *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* was a stark reminder of the slow, often uneven but steady elaboration of feminist engagements in art history worldwide.⁴ My reading of this 2010 assemblage of paintings that had been stored, hidden and ignored in basements across Poland would be enriched by thirty years of feminist insights, methodologies and theories begun in the early 1970s when I first met Rozsika Parker.

It was on my return from Lodz on 6 November that my husband informed me of her tragic death on 5 November, aged sixty-four. It was a terrible shock because the possibility that she could die, despite having been diagnosed with a virulent cancer, had been firmly put out of my head. She could not. When she first told us of her illness, I felt obliged to make every effort to see her, despite our living in different cities and having followed different paths over several decades. In the last few years, we would more often than not meet, though still rarely, at conferences on psychoanalytical subjects, or on maternal studies rather than in art or art historical circles. Since the end of our fourteen-year writing collaboration in which we worked on three publications together, Rozsika Parker had become a psychotherapist and novelist, I a full-time professional academic.⁵ We each had children, and had become caught up in different worlds of work and family. Visiting someone with a diagnosis of a terminal cancer meant risking acknowledging potentially imminent death, even imposing my anxiety upon her, while wishing to deflect such an idea by continuing to talk about shared issues, new books, old questions, as if nothing was happening. Rosie was frank and realistic but necessarily hopeful that this particular enemy within might be controlled, shrunk, excised. Treatment had been going well. It was possible to hope and focus on immediate activities. She managed to finish her new book on body dysmorphia that summer. We talked as of old about how to make sense of images, bodies, psyches and societal pressures, she soliciting my reflections on her ever astute reflections on contemporary body issues.

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When my friend and colleague Judith Mastai phoned from Vancouver in December 2000 to tell me that the pain in her legs was now thought to be an indication of cancer, I almost jumped on a plane immediately. But would my arrival not simply signal my assumption that it was time to say goodbye? I did not go. I always regretted not doing so. With Rosie, I made sure I did visit. But pressure of a new semester at university and anxiety about overburdening her with visits, meant that October went by without one. Then she was dead.

I have to admit that I run into trouble confronting cancer. Any encounter with imminent death swerves me back, unwilling but unable to resist, to the traumatic moment when I saw my mother a month before she died from cancer. It was three months after I had last seen her, in pain, but still my mother. But now, the fragile, emaciated and drugged patient I encountered when I was taken to visit my mother in her last months was more shattering in its immediate traumatic impact than the utterly undigestible news, delivered far away from her hospital bed, a month later that she had died the night before. At that moment, my mind snapped shut, sealing me against a statement impossible to digest, isolating the unassimilable pain.

For many years, I could not speak those words. At school, if my teachers, knowing of my mother's prolonged illness, asked how she was, I told them she was fine. I feared to utter the truth, not it seemed because I could not say she had died or denied the fact, but because I felt that *they* could not bear to hear it. In retrospect, it is clear that I was projecting away from my numbed self the deadly impact of the word 'died' that might, if uttered, shatter the hard protective shell of initial shock. I tried to protect others from what seemed to me, but could not yet be acknowledged as, so terrible that the very admission of the truth might 'kill' them, which means, kill me.

I have long remained in revolt against the trite finiteness of the phrase: 'My mother died...' Lots of people lose one or other or even both parents in childhood or early adulthood. The words 'Her mother/father died when she was...' become part of the biographical narrative in which the past tense fixes an event in time past. I never felt that. Death enters into the life of the survivor, making the latter the long-term subject of death, the continuous subjective locus of that which has happened to another but which now 'lives' in the permanently bereaved. The bereaved child is inhabited by the loss of the parent, her life redirected henceforward in ways that radically reorient her future. She will never know who she might have been but the person she will become is forever inflected by the trauma of the dead mother's absence and, paradoxically, by its constant presence. Indeed death is lived as the accumulation of absence, the endlessness of a failed return, a permanent susceptibility to falling into the hole of loss at any time, any place, pricked by so many chance images, stories, sounds. Through endless films about lost or returning parents, my children watched me for the signs. 'Are you crying, Mummy?' they would tenderly ask. When my daughter and I went to see a film *Stepmom*, with Julia Roberts and Susan Sarandon, and the unfolding narrative revealed the imminent death of the Sarandon's character, the mother, from cancer, I fled the cinema half-way through the movie, afraid of what might viscerally and noisily well-up from within as unmediated grief, again. Even mediated by Hollywood *schmaltz*, it

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was literally unbearable to be taken narratively towards a dying mother.

In 1992, I was invited to a conference to launch a book by Elisabeth Bronfen on the intimate cultural entwining of fear of death, femininity and the aesthetic in Western literature, music and art.⁶ Could this be an occasion to break my silence, to speak the words, in public, to testify to survival and the dying involved? But what form would allow me to write or speak otherwise than in professionally authorised academic terms?

I sat down and wrote, in one single writing session, a text titled 'Deadly tales', the like of which I had never imagined nor dared to imagine writing, let alone speaking out loud.⁷ It could only be presented as a kind of performance, inviting another way of listening from the audience, a bond of hearing rather than reading. I do not know how I found the courage to breach the protocols of the academic discussion of representations of death in order to represent, by means of my own aesthetically fashioned seven-part text, a series of tales of my own encounters with, and failed mourning before, the deaths of others including my mother, my father-in-law and an unborn child. It felt extraordinarily daring and liberating to speak 'from the heart' in public. Art-savvy audiences attending, for instance, a performance might be prepared, by the framing of such encounters as 'art', for forms of personal narration; artists are expected, if not required, to speak in the first person. (Indeed politically charged art is condemned for being too much the opposite.) But academic audiences are disturbed by intrusions of the personal into the supposedly objective and analytical. In such a live performance inside a conference, I sensed that my audience felt disoriented, even panicked. As the tales unfolded from a cold academic start into ever more intense and personal testimony, were they wondering: 'Will she be able to say the words, and will we be able to listen?' I was asking myself, 'Will my body stand up to what I am touching through speaking thus or will it betray me with eruptions of its encrypted grief?' In this encounter, audience and speaker were alike challenged by soliciting affectivity in a place usually protected from personally-charged affects.

I structured my freighted and affecting memories into a symbolic, seven-part form in which the journey into and out from the central section (number four lying between two groups of three stories) was flanked by shifting degrees of public knowledge or historical reference. My experiment developed into art-based performance work by translation of the spoken paper into a video, shown on a television monitor atop a filing cabinet lined with photographic traces.⁸ The voice-over was distanced from the 'speaking head' and its cabinet of memories by being played through headphones placed on chairs across the space. The voice was thus not televisual and spectacularised, but intimately played through the resonating chamber within the listener's own body. The voice spoke with the viewer as the viewer then contemplated the flow of images across the distant screen. In speaking the text as a live performance twice during the exhibition the fragility of my body as the hysterical site of traumatic affect introduced profound risk, charging the time of my speaking and their listening with what sometimes was felt as unbearable tension.

I started with a reading of a highly ritualised sixteenth-century painting of a

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dead mother mourned by husband and son in which the female body functions as vessel for the passage of a dynastic lineage, moving through a reflection on the suicide of cultural theorist Walter Benjamin and the meaning of premature ends to intellectual projects, to the sudden death of my father-in-law from an undiagnosed cancer, a man who had to live with the knowledge of how his parents had died in Auschwitz. These tales intertwined stories of my mother's early death aged fifty-two and my first miscarriage before returning through a discussion of Roland Barthes's mourning for his mother at the heart of his text on photography, *Camera Lucida*, and Freud's failure to grasp the psychic significance of the maternal in his scheme of paternal/filial succession. I ended with Tom Stoppard from whom I draw the insight that 'death is not anything ... death is not ... It's the absence of presence, nothing more ... the endless time of never coming back ... a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound'.⁹

In the central section, I sought to make sense of my own time-bending experience during pregnancy, and its failure, of a restaging of maternal loss. The future hope of bearing a child, surely a daughter, was unconsciously a desire to recreate the vertical bond with my own mother, who would somehow be also in the child I was carrying. I would love this child better and thus death could be obliquely defeated. But this child did not come to term. I was plunged into a deep mourning, a transferred depression that remained in possession of me until the date predicted for the birth had the child lived. Possessed by the transitivity of memory that invested the unborn child with my lost mother, I was also subject to the power of a psycho-corporeal clock that appeared to know the moment it might release me into life again. In serving out in grief the due period of anticipation of new life, I found myself ultimately able to begin to mourn my mother. Death, maternal bereavement, and bereavement in pregnancy could then become topics of research, writing and teaching. A new form of writing would be needed that would refuse the opposition which at once silences the affective dimension in public discourse and abstracts intellectual life from embodied, affective experiences.

I have been telling you, my reader, why, when faced with the announcement of Rosie's cancer, I felt panicked into a kind of denial of her mortal danger. That has led to a story about beginning to do a different kind of work within the context of being a professional academic, work that bridged aesthetic and intellectual operations, intimate encounters with death and loss and cultural explorations of representations of death and loss. I share these stories in order to situate the following more historical testimony because I have come to recognise, in mourning Rosie, that she and her writing were the source of what enabled me to do both, then and now, and line all my work as an art historian with an intensity of feeling. She enabled my *feminist writing otherwise* to perform the feminist gesture of breaching the rigid separation of knowledge from experience, thought from affect. In the 1970s Rosie had created a form of art writing that would compel me for most of my working life. It was, however, only once she was missing, that the full realisation of her inspirational presence became excruciatingly clear to me. So writing of her is about the dying to which, in Felman's terms, survival can only bear its painful but constant witness.

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Feminist beginnings: Rozsika Parker reading and writing

How heady were the days of the early women's movement! We were so unencumbered by the now wonderful but still heavy weight of feminist theory. It is hard to imagine what it was like when there was in effect nothing to read about women and art, about feminist psychoanalysis, literary theory, sociology, about poststructuralism, deconstruction and certainly no post-feminism. We had to invent every move. We did it in informal reading groups and constantly forming and morphing collectives. We worked together with the deluded ambition of youth, believing that we could, and we had to, change things. That aspiration and its energies came from unblocking the steel doors between officially sanctioned knowledge and that which we might draw out from sharing stories, experiences, questions and curiosity.¹⁰

When I met Rosie Parker in 1973, and we set out on our adventure to construct our own contribution of emerging feminist art history in Britain, she was already wonderfully equipped with what we would nowadays call a truly interdisciplinary mind. In fact, it was her gift to think across borders, elegantly to bring her passionate insights from psychoanalytical understanding – already fully formed before her formal training – and her compassionate reading of literature into relationship with visual art past and contemporary. She had studied art history at the Courtauld Institute, which was, in the later 1960s, one of only three or four places where this now highly popular subject was taught. But what would that Institute have given her but facts and figures about great men studied within the limited parameters of formalist (modern) or iconographic (premodern) analysis? I went to the same Institute a few years after she graduated to receive the same diet of dullness. So, where did Rozsika Parker's ability to create a new form of art writing emerge from when she became a feminist writer on art in the first British feminist magazine *Spare Rib* launched in June 1972?

Against a tide of esoterically abstract art and formalist art talk, Rosie made art matter. In her recent film, *!Women Artists in Revolution* (2011), Lynn Hershman Leeson reminds us of the paradox of the huge disjuncture between art and society in the later 1960s, notably in the United States. Minimalism, abstract, esoteric, and self-absorbed, ruled the artworld while American society was combusting with civil rights, black power, student movements and anti-war demonstrations in which students were shot, when the carnivalesque women's movement exploded onto the streets. American critic Lucy Lippard became a feminist when she refused this separation and championed art that bridged the social and the everyday.¹¹ Rosie's feminist vision was different from Lippard's social agenda. Rosie revealed the relation between pain and pleasure, or rather she acknowledged the power and depth of suffering, of conflicted feelings and ambivalence while also seeing in that very human dimension of susceptibility the counter-capacity for laughter and life. Long before formal trauma studies emerged, she was tracking the generic traumas of class- and race-inflected femininities, of bodies at odds with subjectivities, of subjectivities dislocated from their social and cultural worlds, their forms

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of desire, unanchored through obliterated histories and unknown forebears in art and literature.

During our first collaborative writing project, from 1975 to 1981, we wove together, hilariously, painfully and with the help of a certain amount of chocolate a text that challenged the central tenets of conventional art history: individuality, authorship, competition, formalism that abstracted art from lived experience, both socially and psychologically inflected.¹² We dedicated our collective abilities to exploring, through visual and cultural inscriptions, the questions that shaped our own lives as women: sexed, raced, classed, desiring and wounded. We found such questions resonating across time and space in what we read or saw in older art now rediscovered and reinterpreted by ‘feminist desire’ and re-visioned through the novel lens of later twentieth-century feminist attention to bodies and psyches.¹³

In 1980, Rosie wrote a review of *Women's Images of Men* at the ICA, London, a challenging exhibition of contemporary figurative works based on inverting the masculine gaze at women by showing how women artists represented masculinity. Rosie bypassed the clogged criticism that derided the value of merely inverting the terms of who looks at whom. She ignored the difficulties much of the work posed in some avant-gardist artistic circles by its figurative orientation. Her review opens with a quotation from a letter written by novelist Georges Sand to her lover, Frédéric Chopin, that already indicates a recurring trope in women's management of masculinity. Drawing later on novels by the Brontës and May Sinclair, Rosie showed how often women loved and cared for men who were in some way invalids – she referenced Jane Eyre and the blind Mr Rochester, for instance. Rosie tracked the unconscious repetitions of this trope of women's compassion for wounded masculinity across a diverse range of work, media and purposes in the 1980 exhibition. While men might cry out ‘castration!’ when seeing images of men seemingly disempowered by sleep, disability, or other forms of constriction, Rosie contested the one-sided reading by reminding the Western world of the most widely circulated image of masculinity: the crucified Christ which represents an archetypal wounded man. Yet as a symbol of profound pathos, the image of the invalidated man resurfaces in secularised contemporary forms transcending individual artists' purposes. Using her knowledge of nineteenth-century women's literature, Rosie compassionately and imaginatively read contemporary artwork by women that dealt with mute anxiety about power relations and domination by creating scenarios in which masculinity can be approached with empathy and returned to the tender, or sometimes exhaustingly needy, relations with woman as mother.¹⁴ Rozsika Parker was an eclectic reader often of forgotten women authors, soon to be rediscovered and republished by Virago and the Women's Press. She had discovered an underground spring, an earlier source of affective and intellectual nourishment in nineteenth century women's literature that could reorient the abstracted official art discourses that prevailed for the study of the visual arts in the later twentieth century.

Rosie favoured and pioneered the interview as conversation with the artist as a means of discovering the complex configurations of life and work. In 1974 she

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talked with Margaret Priest (b.1944).¹⁵ The interview with the artist was a relatively new form in art history, indicative of the intense individualisation of the modern artist. In the United States, Cindy Nemser used this format in her feminist research that appeared first in *Feminist Art News* and then was collectively published as *Art Talk* in 1975.¹⁶ Like Nemser, Rosie used the interview format to explore areas of experience that were usually not mentioned in artist interviews: gender, ethnic and class specific aspects of women's access to artmaking, experience of institutional discrimination, gender consciousness and the role of socio-personal formation in the art practice itself. Rosie starts asking a simple question about Margaret Priest's background – not to draw out the usual legendary tropes that prevail in masculine narratives of the artist's childhood – but to draw a feminist-attuned portrait of a physically fragile, child and a sometimes insecure, yet self-directing working class woman, with intellectual ability to move into the professions via university, who, against the grain of both her parents' class expectations and those of her bourgeois peers, then chose to go to art school.¹⁷

starts by
asking? (as
opposed
to starts
[but doesn't
necessarily
finish])

RP: I am surprised you had the courage and confidence to persist.

MP: It's not courage, it's effrontery – there is terrific effrontery to becoming an artist...

RP: Were you encouraged at school to go on to art college?

MP: No, because the area in which I lived – Dagenham – was a cultural wilderness. I went to the only grammar school in the area. And once you prove yourself to be clever, everybody expected you to go onto art school. I just had this terrible thing that I had to escape, I didn't know what from, but just where I'd be valued, and I didn't feel valued there.¹⁸

Through this almost analytically prompted conversation, major themes emerge through the personal lens of Margaret Priest's experience. Priest reflects on the pressure women experienced to conform to currently desirable body types. Yet if they presented themselves fashionably, they are deemed to lack the intensity necessary to become an artist. Insight into anguished fantasies about one's body and the spectacularisation of femininity emerge from Priest's life story while also leading to wider theorisation of class and gendered bodies and minds. Directed to graphic design rather than 'serious' fine art reserved for male students, Priest rebelled and became a painter only to reject the obligatory female impersonation of the great male painter working in oil on a vast scale. She turned to delicate and precision drawings in pencil, risking a new range of stereotypes that turned her exquisite vision and precise craft skills into a frigid sign of feminine deficiency. Margaret Priest defines her own contradictory relation to mimicking the impersonal perfection of media reproduction while using a craft-based practice as a 'vehicle for emotion'.¹⁹ Crucially the artist herself brings back the relation between craft and affect to the body. Priest suffers from asthma, and the drawing named in the article's title is about a dream of going where American asthmatics are sent for therapy – Arizona – but arriving even there, 'still out of breath'. The interview has been shaped to move through childhood formation, encounters with the art

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institution, negotiating social attitudes and gendered stereotypes to the intimacy between process and effect, all mediated by the sexed, classed and physically as well as psychically vulnerable body. Margaret Priest left Britain in 1976 and has since lived in Canada, now being Emerita Professor of Fine Art at the University of Guelph.²⁰

In 1974 Rosie also wrote about astonishing American photographer Diane Arbus (1923–71), and British cartoonist Posy Simmons.²¹ Both deal in totally different ways with a relation to the body. Rosie wrote:

Diane Arbus' vision is infectious. Just as some authors write with such a powerful vision that you continue to see the world through their eyes, even after closing the book, so too with Diane Arbus. After looking away from her work, people seem alienated, exposed bathed in vaguely unhealthy sheen. To what extent are we sharing a personal nightmare, and to what extent is she opening our eyes to reality?²²

In being able to pose such questions, that avoid the art historical attempt to place the artist in a narrative of nation, period or movement, Rosie Parker grants the artist personal integrity of a vision and social effect in disclosing an aspect of the external world. The body would also be the focus of another major article of that year on the British artist Judy Clark (b.1949).

Judy Clark studied fine art at Portsmouth Polytechnic and the Slade School of Art, after which she emerged onto the London artscene with a series of exhibitions called *Issues*. In 2010, her work, which had finally been bought in the 1970s by the Tate, appeared in a show titled *Beneath the Radar in 1970s London* organised by the England & Co. Gallery, in London. Clark's show *Body Works* in 1974 led to an interview by Rosie Parker.

Judy Clark did not identify with nascent feminism. Her work was inspired by anthropologist Mary Douglas' work on taboos around dirt and purity, which function as symbolic forms of control over the threatening chaos of life and death.²³ Clark collected, and framed in minimalist grids and boxes, remnants and traces of the body from blood-stained plasters to dabs of menstrual blood, from semen-stained tissues to body hair accumulated over a week of sleep in a bed, from bodily fluids to weekly collections of dust from everyday living. Rosie's questions focus on the way that the artworks handle bodily materials intersects with the psycho-social imaginary that underpins taboo and enforced invisibility, the anxiety about things 'out of place' and the fear of structural disorder in the social and symbolic universe. Rosie identified the considerable intellectual charge of Clark's conceptual art project about time, rhythms, cycles and sexual as well as gendered embodiment. What is distinctive is how Rosie integrated these insights with respect for the artist's working process and 'curiosity' about how we function as bodies generating and living amongst waste. The article is a monument both to the artist and her work and to the subtlety and erudition of the interdisciplinary interviewer who recognised the theoretical foundations through which the artist's project acquired its significance for feminist thinking at the time.²⁴

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In 1975 Rosie Parker authored a benchmark article rediscovering for our generation the once notorious nineteenth-century Russian artist and diarist Marie Bashkirtseff who succumbed to tuberculosis aged only twenty-five in 1884 but was renowned in the following decades when censored selections of her daringly confessional diaries, which Bashkirtseff had written since the age of thirteen, were translated and published.²⁵ The original sixteen volumes have since become available in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. Rosie's article formed the basis for an initial discussion of Bashkirtseff in *Old Mistresses*, but also for the introduction to the 1987 Virago reprint of the diary.²⁶ By that time Rosie had trained as a psychoanalyst, bringing a wider range of theorisations of feminine narcissism and narcissistic injury to bear on the reading of Bashkirtseff's diary. The *Spare Rib* article had already established her model of compassionate interpretation of the psychological complexity of a privileged, aristocratic young woman who wanted to be an artist in order to be famous, and to be loved for what she had done, rather than for mere appearance. Such ambition was doubly contrary to the prescribed passivity and decorativeness of a woman of her class. Bashkirtseff used the pages of her diary to invent a virtual space through which **both** to imagine herself as a person in her own right and to play with the object of others' desire, **but more importantly, admiration.** Conditioned by various childhood losses and dislocations, Bashkirtseff had been extensively cited by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) as the catastrophic example of fatal feminine narcissism.²⁷ For Parker, the job was, however, to listen to the voice emerging across the diary, understanding its ambivalence and contradictions without de Beauvoir's dismissive judgement of one damaged woman who served as type for women's deformation under patriarchy. Rosie exposed narcissistic injury as neither individual pathology nor the generic condition of woman: it became a key to rethinking the psychosocial complexities that contemporary feminism was exposing through consciousness-raising and feminist attunement to the psychic formations of sexual difference. Bashkirtseff had indeed, under a necessary pseudonym, published political writings in leading French feminist papers. But careful feminist study of the diary also revealed the core of self-doubt that assailed this apparently arrogant, ambitious and petted aristocrat. It also revealed her courage in facing the imminence of premature death in her mid-twenties with dignity and acceptance. It highlighted the daring with which she breached class protocols in order to make herself into someone by making herself an artist, inspired by an earlier period of feminist activism.

Rosie Parker wrote many articles on the campaign for equality in exhibitions and museum collections as well as reviewing one of the major shows curated by Lucy Lippard that was brought to London in 1974 despite the refusal of the Royal College of Art to offer the space and of the Arts Council to fund the show.²⁸ With only transport paid for, the show, titled *Ca. 7,500*, was sustained solely by volunteers at The Warehouse, a small gallery in Earlham Street. It introduced many of us in London to the work of American artists such as Laurie Anderson, Eleanor Antin, **Mierle Ukeles Laderman**, Agnes Denes, Adrian Piper, Martha Wilson and other now recognised international conceptual artists. Lippard made

I've moved
"both" from
its original
position, but
it doesn't
solve the
problem of
how the last
(coloured)
part of the
sentence
fits in.

Seems to
be Mierle
Laderman
Ukeles in
google
searches.

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the show all-women to challenge the prevailing idea that no women were making conceptual art, in which formal or material considerations give way to ideas and a critique of representational conventions. Lippard also wished to bring out the potential for a specifically feminist critique of cultural norms facilitated by the expanding possibilities of non-formalist performance art, photographic work, interviews, re-enactments and so forth. Having made her own selection of works to mention, Rosie then turned on the other critics for their astonishingly sexist and ignorant assault on this show. This was a new move that we had already used in *Old Mistresses*: subjecting the terms and assumptions of critical writing to feminist deconstruction by tracking metaphors and modes of judgement in art criticism as a sexist system, structural to how art history sustains masculine hegemony, rather than merely personal prejudices. The exhibition, only some of which engaged with issues of gender and sexuality, was tarred by mainstream critics like Caroline Tisdall as ‘stinking of the ghetto’, and being aesthetically second rate.²⁹ The crudity of the put-downs show how *feminist* conceptual art disturbed the critics, who consistently used a negatively coded *gendered* vocabulary to avoid any engagement with what women-artists were seeking to make visible in this new cultural form: the contradictions they experienced between identities as women and artists.

‘Self-preoccupied’, ‘narcissistic’, ‘self-indulgent’ were words constantly used in reference to the show, yet communication was the central theme – communication based on the recognition of shared experience, and an implied need for change. But then once the artist and the audience communicate the critic’s role as a mediator becomes obsolete.

Although critics attacked artists for being self-preoccupied, it didn’t occur to them to ask why women artists should feel the need to question their identity as both artists and women, or whether there was a discrepancy between the stereotype of the artist and the female stereotype. Instead they viewed it in the light of established definitions – it wasn’t conceptual art, it was second-rate.³⁰

In her own voice

These snippets indicate something of the voice that emerged in Rosie’s wide range of writings and the imagination that enabled her to lay out a field of new ways of writing art for others. Perhaps her most famous article is ‘The word for embroidery was work’. ³¹ This would form the kernel for her most celebrated single-authored book, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*.³² Rosie’s work not only challenged the dominant hierarchy of aesthetic value that elevates art over craft and aligns the latter with the feminine as mindless and repetitious, but it also developed subtle readings of the historically shifting psycho-social formations of femininity that were formed across social practices of enforced domesticity, passivity and silencing encoded in obligatory needlework. Furthermore, Rosie revealed the scope within the textile arts for negotiation and counter-self-inscription by rebellious women. To explain the notion of femininity as a formation, schooled, disciplined, performed, yet also contested, revised and

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historically as well as subjectively shifting, no other work of cultural analysis is as compelling. It defies classification while opening up an entire new field of approaches to cultural practices using cloth and needle that has since been elaborated across museums, fine-art schools and feminist studies.

One final article is significant in this context of writing as testimony to trauma and survival. In 1979, Rozsika Parker wrote her bravest article, which anticipated by over a decade the recognition that femininities come not only classed, and variously sexualised, but also marked by cultural ethnicities and hence deformed not only by racism but by a particular form of it that remained below the threshold of utterability.³³ In ‘Being Jewish: anti-semitism and Jewish women’, Rosie addressed feminism as well as the unimaginable resurgence of anti-semitism in contemporary Britain and Europe at the time.³⁴

A montage of quotations from women she had interviewed, Rozsika Parker’s article weaves a subtle analytical web around women’s testimonies to the trauma of racist abuse and to their conflicted relations to both Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. At one point, voicing a more general point, the text reads:

There can be no single explanation for anti-semitism: yet nor have there been satisfactory linkings of the economic and psychoanalytical factors which contribute to it. It’s here, I think, that feminists could provide an understanding of anti-semitism, because feminism has a framework which enables us to see the connections between the wider oppression and the individual oppression, and that the individual psyche reflects the structure of society.³⁵

Firstly, Rosie confronted the ambivalence felt by some contemporary Jewish feminists about their Jewishness, about their attachments to or dislocations from Jewish life and community, and above all about what to do about anti-semitism in general and specifically within the women’s movement. Touching on a range of historical and contemporary political issues, the article opens up a field held together, however, by an implicit model that refuses to separate facts, statistics, histories, from the bodies and minds that ‘live’ out, negotiate and indeed suffer from internalising their effects. The often unspoken sense of ‘difference’ or enforced outsiderness, shaped through social encounters but also through the gaze and hence the sense of embodied otherness is traced into language. Rosie elegantly introduces economic, political and psychoanalytical explanations of anti-semitism that constitute the wretched stereotypes not only of the Jew (the emasculated masculine) but also of the Jewish woman in particular – *la belle juive* over-endowed with sexuality and perfidy – while filtering these ‘structural’ analyses through excerpts from conversations with a highly diverse group of Jewish feminists who offer testimony to contingent experiences in family, education, work and political activity. While writing an article that was ground-breaking and remains a crucial resource, Rosie also performed her own bond of reading with those who shared their experiences of this difference with her.

I am seeking to show how Rozsika Parker’s work was a form of *feminist writing otherwise* that cannot be classified simply as art journalism, art history, or literature. Looking back as a result of her untimely death, it is ever clearer to me that

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she had created a space at that initiating moment in the pages of a collectively published feminist magazine, and that she was doing more than writing about art. Writing met art to write back to *life lives* that had hitherto been without either art or writing, hence unknown, uninscribed, unvoiced. What Rozsika Parker evolved was itself an artform exploring traumatised feminine existences whose autobiographies were missing – insofar as the traumatic is the unsaid, the unsayable, the burden of experience that has yet no form to mediate its affects and no terms to allow it to become a form of self-understanding.

Are both
words inten-
tional?

Rozsika Parker's art- and life-writing with art and artists exploded the oppressive structure of assumed authority to speak about others, in order to weave and plait texts made from working with her peers. Her writing caught up a chorus of voices building out from conversational encounters what can only be named a theoretical framework for registering the networks of forces and resulting lived ambivalences that constituted some of the traumas of contemporary femininities – classed, raced, ethnicised, desiring, embodied, sensate, material, psychically vivid, thinking, speaking, writing and making. Ancient Hebrew and hence Jewish thought locates both mind and passion in the heart, 'Lev', refusing to isolate intellect and emotion. Rozsika Parker's was indeed a *writing from the heart*, a gift of a subtle intelligence that defied so many of the tortured theoretical divisions that have since fractured feminist theory. I was privileged to have worked with Rozsika Parker over fourteen years when feminism was a constant process of opening possibilities. In mourning the loss of her continuing contributions, literary, analytical and by personal example, I have written now, I hope, from my own heart, not only a small personal tribute but a work of necessary reinscription of Rozsika Parker into a feminist genealogy of *writing otherwise*.

Notes

- 1 Shoshana Felman, 'The question of autobiography and the bond of reading', p. 16.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 14
- 3 Rozsika Parker, her full name, was used for monographs. As an art critic she wrote as Rosie Parker and was generally known to friends as Rosie.
- 4 Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*.
- 5 Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses; Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970–1985; The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff*.
- 6 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Femininity and the Aesthetic*.
- 7 Pollock, 'Deadly tales'.
- 8 It has been shown in exhibitions at Leeds Metropolitan University Art Gallery in 1996 and in London at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 2011.
- 9 Tom Stoppard, *Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, pp. 90–1.
- 10 The earliest and still significant critique of a man-centred canon of knowledge and academic institutions is Adrienne Rich, 'Towards a woman-centred university'.
- 11 Lucy Lippard, in *From the Center*, recounts her becoming a feminist critic and ambivalent relations to the central trope of the body in women's new art forms. See also her 'Sweeping exchanges: the contribution of feminism to the art of the 1970s', which values feminist turns to narrative, autobiography and public engagement art.

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- 12 See also Jackie Dea, ‘*Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*’: Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock describe the book’s genesis’.
- 13 I formulated this theoretical impossibility in 1999. ‘Feminist desire’ signals a desire for difference, for other stories and for the discovery of the otherness of feminine subjectivities in all their complexities. See Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories*.
- 14 Parker, ‘Images of men’.
- 15 Parker, “‘Still Out of Breath in Arizona” and other pictures: an interview with Margaret Priest’. See also Parker, “Dedicated to the unknown artists”: interview with Susan Hiller.’
- 16 Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with Twelve Women Artists*.
- 17 Ernest Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*.
- 18 Parker, ‘‘Still Out of Breath in Arizona’’, p. 38
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 20 I contacted Margaret Priest in Canada and she responded to my email enquiry: ‘The interview with Rozsika – or Rosie as I then called her – was an important marker in my early career and I have remained enormously thankful to her, to *Spare Rib* and to you. At the time, her piece brought some serious attention to my work and I found it did so yet again many years later when the interview was included in *Framing Feminism*.’ (3 May 2012; permission granted to cite, 14 July 2012)
- 21 Parker, “‘Chocolates’ by Posy Simmonds’.
- 22 Parker, ‘‘Diane Arbus’’, p. 39.
- 23 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.
- 24 Parker, “‘Body Works’”: Rosie Parker talks to Judy Clark about her recent exhibition’.
- 25 Parker, ‘Portrait of the artist as a young woman: Marie Bashkirtseff’.
- 26 Parker and Pollock, ‘New introduction’.
- 27 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.
- 28 See for instance, Parker “‘A piece of the pie?’”: a preview of the Hayward Annual Exhibition’.
- 29 Caroline Tisdall, ‘26 conceptual artists in London’.
- 30 Parker, ‘Art of course has no sex, but artists do’ [*Ca. 7,500*: Exhibition of twenty-six American conceptual artists, curated by Lucy Lippard], p. 35.
- 31 Parker, ‘The word for embroidery was work’.
- 32 Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*.
- 33 The exploration of feminism and Jewishness was taken up by Lisa Bloom, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity*.
- 34 Parker, ‘Being Jewish: anti-semitism and Jewish women.’
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

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