



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

This thesis has been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree (e.g. PhD, MPhil, DClinPsychol) at the University of Edinburgh. Please note the following terms and conditions of use:

This work is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, which are retained by the thesis author, unless otherwise stated.

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge.

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author.

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author.

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given.

Women's Still Life in London, Paris and the Spaces Between, 1900-1939

Rebecca Birrell

PhD

University of Edinburgh

History of Art

Submitted July 2021

Often nothing tangible remains of a woman's day. The food that has been cooked is eaten; the children that have been nursed have gone out into the world. Where does the accent fall? What is the salient point for the novelist to seize upon? It is difficult to say. Her life has an anonymous character which is baffling and puzzling in the extreme. For the first time, this dark country is beginning to be explored in fiction; and at the same moment a woman has also to record the changes in women's minds and habits which the opening of the professions has introduced. She has to observe how their lives are ceasing to run underground; she has to discover what new colours and shadows are showing in them now that they are exposed to the outer world.

Virginia Woolf, 'Women and Fiction' (1929)

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a feminist and queer study of the ways in which gender, subjectivity, domesticity and the cultures of interior space were articulated, interrogated and renegotiated by early twentieth century women artists. Through analysis of the work of artists Gwen John (1876-1939), Ethel Sands (1873-1962) Vanessa Bell (1879-1961), and Gluck (1895-1978), it examines how a broadly defined category of still life generated and reflected their gendered, sexual, and emotional identities in ways that might more broadly illuminate women's lived experiences in the early twentieth century. I explore a constellation of feelings united by their distance from the affective paradigms of modernity, including attention, tenderness, gratitude, happiness, attraction, comfort, tranquillity and empathy. Through their own aesthetic and emotional strategies and to different extents, this thesis shows how each of these women queered still life, actively remaking the genre through queer affects, attachments and orientations. The *spaces between* of the thesis's title refers to a geographical phenomenon – of artists moving across metropolitan and rural spaces – but also to a methodological interstices. This thesis will create scholarship that exists in the *spaces between* art historical disciplinary norms and the creative-critical experiments of queer and feminist work. Chapter 1 frames John's representations of rooms as models of interiority. Chapter 2 reveals how Bell's still life represented and contested the ideologies of motherhood. Chapter 3 explores the queer artistic collaboration between Gluck and society florist Constance Spry. Chapter 4 is the first ever critical study of Ethel Sands, exploring her queering of interior scenes through motifs of illusion, misdirection, and disguise. In the *spaces between* chapters, encounters with obscure women artists in the archive emerge: I discuss Winifred Gill's note-making practices, Edna Waugh's evocative sketches and passionate literary adaptations, paralysis and impossibility in the work of Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd, and the unknown literary ambitions of artist Helen Coombe.

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations.....	5
List of Figures.....	6
Acknowledgements.....	8
Author’s Declaration.....	9
Prologue: A possible definition of still life.....	10
Introduction.....	14
Chapter 1: Gwen John’s Interior Scenes.....	63
1.5: Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd, <i>Still Life with a Fan</i> (c.1920s).....	113
Chapter 2: Vanessa Bell’s Maternal Aesthetics.....	116
2.5: Edna Waugh, <i>The Wedding Breakfast</i> (1898).....	171
Chapter 3: Gluck, Constance Spry and Queer Collaboration.....	177
3.5: Winifred Gill, <i>Notes of Stories to Tell</i> (c.1920s).....	227
Chapter 4: The paintings of Ethel Sands: a Queer Domestic Aesthetic.....	233
4.5: Helen Coombe, <i>The Lemon</i> (1910).....	275
Epilogue: ‘This Dark Country’.....	280
WORKS CITED.....	286

The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes

BL – British Library, London

BO – Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford: Archive of Winifred Gill

CT – Charleston Trust Archives, Lewes, East Sussex

GA – Gluck Archive, London.

HR/DC – Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin: Dora Carrington Collection
1912–1965

HR/GB – Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin: Gerald Brenan Collection 1911–
1978

KC – King's College Archives, Cambridge University

NLW – National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

TA – Tate Archives, London

List of Figures

- Figure 1: Vanessa Bell, *Shopping List*, CHA/P/320/3, The Charleston Trust...
- Figure 2: Gwen John, *La Chambre sur la cour*, c.1907–8, Yale Center for British Art..
- Figure 3: Nina Hamnett, *Der Sturm*, 1913, Private Collection.
- Figure 4: Ursula Tyrwhitt, *Woman sitting on a bed*, c. 1930s, The National Library of Wales.
- Figure 5: Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd, *Gwen John*, 1905, The National Library of Wales.
- Figure 6: Gwen John, *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1905-7, Museums Sheffield
- Figure 7: Gwen John, *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1905-7, National Museum Wales.
- Figure 8: Gwen John, *A Lady Reading*, 1909-11, Tate.
- Figure 9: Gwen John, *Girl Reading at a Window*, 1911, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- Figure 10: Berthe Morisot, *The Artist's Sister at a Window*, 1869, National Gallery of Art, Washington.
- Figure 11: Gwen John, *The Japanese Doll*, c.1927, National Museum Wales.
- Figure 12: Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd, *Still Life with Fan*, c.1920, The Charleston Trust.
- Figure 13: Vanessa Bell, drawing of the artist's son Julian, 1908, CHA/P/621/15, The Charleston Trust.
- Figure 14: Vanessa Bell, drawing of the artist's son Julian, 1908, CHA/P/621/15, The Charleston Trust.
- Figure 15: Vanessa Bell, drawing of the artist's son Julian, 1908, CHA/P/621/15, The Charleston Trust.
- Figure 16: Vanessa Bell, *Nursey Tea*, 1912, Private Collection.
- Figure 17: Vanessa Bell, *Abstract*, c. 1914, Tate.
- Figure 18: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life on the Corner of a Mantlepiece*, 1914, Tate.
- Figure 19: Vanessa Bell, *Oranges and Lemons*, 1914, Private Collection.

Figure 20: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life of a Vase and Vegetables*, c. 1928 – 1939, National Trust, Monks House.

Figure 21: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life with Decanter*, 1941, National Museum Wales, Cardiff.

Figure 22: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life*, 1933, Cartwright Hall Art Gallery.

Figure 23: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life with Pears and Everlasting Flowers*, 1945, The Charleston Trust.

Figure 24: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life with Apples*, undated, The Charleston Trust.

Figure 25: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life with Oranges and Lemons*, undated, The Charleston Trust.

Figure 26: Vanessa Bell, *Flowers in a Ginger Jar*, 1931, Ulster Museum.

Figure 27: Vanessa Bell, *Zinnias*, 1943, Usher Gallery.

Figure 28: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life*, undated, The Charleston Trust.

Figure 29: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life*, undated, The Charleston Trust.

Figure 30: Vanessa Bell, Sketchbook sheet, undated, CHA/P/315/18, The Charleston Trust.

Figure 31: Vanessa Bell, *The Kitchen*, 1943, The Charleston Trust.

Figure 32: Edna Waugh, Sketchbook sheet, undated, TGA 8226, Tate Archive.

Figure 33: Edna Waugh, Sketchbook sheet, undated, TGA 8226, Tate Archive.

Figure 34: Edna Waugh, Sketchbook sheet, undated, TGA 8226, Tate Archive.

Figure 35: Edna Waugh, Sketchbook, undated, TGA 8226, Tate Archive.

Figure 36: Gluck, Assorted Prints, undated c. 1930s, Box No. 3, The Gluckstein Family Archive.

Figure 37: Gluck, Assorted Prints, undated c. 1930s, Box No. 3, The Gluckstein Family Archive.

Figure 38: Gluck, Assorted Prints, undated c. 1930s, Box No. 3, The Gluckstein Family Archive.

Figure 39: Gluck, *Ernest Thesiger*, 1925-26, Private Collection

Figure 40: Gluck, *Baldock vs Bell at the Royal Albert Hall*, 1927, Private Collection.

Figure 41: Gluck, *The Pinecone*, early 1920s, Private Collection.

Figure 42: Gluck, *Chromatic*, 1932, private collection

Figure 43: Constance Spry, *Dracunculus*, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1934)

Figure 44: Constance Spry, Pink Shell with Tulips, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1934)

Figure 45: Constance Spry, Kale, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1934)

Figure 46: Constance Spry, Lemons, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1934)

Figure 47: Constance Spry, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1934)

Figure 48: Gluck, *Lilac and Guelder Rose*, c. 1930s, Manchester Art Gallery.

Figure 49: Gluck, *Lilies*, 1936, Private Collection.

Figure 50: Gluck, *Convolvulus*, 1940, Private Collection.

Figure 51: Ethel Sands, *A Dressing Room*, c.1920s, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Figure 52: Ethel Sands, Correspondence, Tate Archive.

Figure 53: Ethel Sands, Correspondence, Tate Archive.

Figure 54: Ethel Sands, *The Chintz Couch*, c.1910-1, Tate.

Figure 55: Ethel Sands, *Interior with Mirror*, c.1920s, Guildhall Art Gallery.

Figure 56: Lady Ottoline Morrell, *Ethel Sands*, 1920, National Portrait Gallery.

Figure 57: Ethel Sands, *Interior at Portland Place, London*, c.1920s, Guildhall Art Gallery.

Figure 58: Ethel Sands, *The Open Door, Auppegard, France*, c.1920s, Guildhall Art Gallery.

Figure 59: Ethel Sands, *Tea with Sickert*, c.1911-12, Tate

Figure 60: Ethel Sands, *Nan Hudson Playing Patience*, c.1920s, Guildhall Art Gallery.

Figure 61: Ethel Sands, *Morning*, c.1920s, Private Collection

Acknowledgements

This thesis was supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council via the Scottish Graduate School of Arts and Humanities (SGSAH). Thank you to my supervisors Patricia Allmer and Carole Jones.

Prologue: a possible definition of still life

In one of the few surviving sketchbooks by Vanessa Bell, informal rather than strictly preparatory in function, full of doodles and unrealised compositions, there is a rare instance of text rather than image. A shopping list has been set down in the distracted space between sketches, practicalities hurriedly purged so as to focus her attention on her art. The frayed edges of other pages ripped from the notebook accumulate at the joint, alluding to the sketchbook's temporal dimension – the detritus left by each torn sheet marking the passage of time – and asserting the sheet's place amongst a series, a single representative material trace of Bell's daily practices. The jagged, undulating line to the right of the list serves no immediately obvious purpose, neither underlining any ingredient nor marking its purchase; it reveals Bell drifting further from her task and into the heady pleasures of form. At the centre of the sheet each ingredient is stated – stout, oysters, salt, lemon, orange – and scored through with a line. The items are at once present and absent, and the list therefore functions both as a verbal still life and a kind of diagram of the inner workings of the form, which celebrates the presence of things that have long since perished. As in Bell's list, in still life the food is there, visible and substantial and inviting our attention, but marked by our knowledge of its vanishing. Part of the magic of still life is an awareness of matter's ephemerality, how time has been halted or reversed on canvas, as well as a kind of mediumship in which obsolete objects are brought back to life, made to speak through the scored through line.

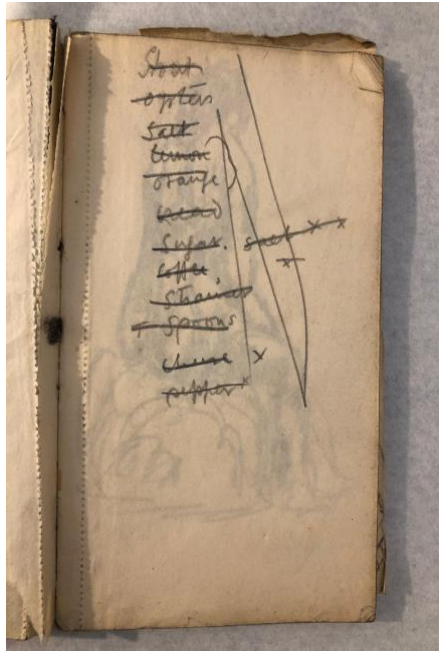


Figure 1: Vanessa Bell, Shopping List, The Charleston Trust.

The paper on which the list is written is so thin the drawing beneath shows through, although precisely what it is remains unclear: a seated figure; a fountain overflowing with water; an abstract form; a mythological figure poised upon a cloud. These intimations of depth and multiplicity are also pertinent to still life as it is understood in this thesis: underneath an apparently simple and functional surface, other worlds and other lives flourish, narratives unfold, and intensities teem.

Bell's shopping list provides a rough blueprint if not a possible definition of the kind of still life this thesis explores. These works built upon a tradition in which the genre communicated the ephemerality of life, tempering the gravity of this theological message in some instances with a feeling of diaristic spontaneity, and in others with a sustained meditation on the pleasures of everyday domestic experience, what structures and sustains its routines. Indeed, no single spectacular recipe is accounted for in this list, nor does it read as the beginnings of some elaborate dinner party; these are ingredients so essential to the smooth functioning of the kitchen they are banal, forgettable enough that they earn a place on a list designed to jog one's memory. The still life in this thesis bears witness to the ordinary rhythms of the home, and in doing so

insists upon the importance of the thoughts, feelings and domestic practices built meticulously in the morning and set aside – anticipating their repetition in the day that follows – by the evening. Transience only acquires a grandeur and significance worthy of artistic record when tied to theological (and therefore predominantly patriarchal) understandings of worth and meaning. Still life traditionally does much visually to allude to the passing of time, but on a scale which dismisses the ebb and flow of daily life presided over by women, fears about one’s own mortality and smallness within the great sweep of humanity superseding any interest in everyday reality. For as Woolf argues in her 1929 essay ‘Women and Fiction’, ‘often nothing tangible remains of a woman’s day’, a reality which was not considered ethically illuminating, just cause to change the parameters of one’s ambitions – to move one’s focus away from the self, and towards some greater good – but was simply how domestic work was arranged within the home. The endless, open-ended chores of cooking and cleaning, alongside what Lauren Berlant describes as the ‘pleasures and burdens of reproducing everyday life in the family’, were forever supplanting and suppressing the flourishing of creative ambition.¹ The still life in this thesis might be defined through its radical attempt to make vivid an intimation of those domestic, affective practices which constituted a woman’s day. Claudia Tobin’s recent study proposes still life as ‘a genre of art and a mode of being’, and while a belief in the lived dimension of still life is shared, this thesis does not understand still life, in Tobin’s impressive formulation, as ‘a condition in which all arts are implicated’.² This thesis examines still life modest in its ambitions, self-consciously minor or backward in its aesthetics, quotidian in its emotional repertoire, clumsy in skill, vexed in its relationship to commercial or critical success. Its horizon was the home, their contents utterly familiar to them; their audience was other women, lovers, friends and children. This work compellingly corresponds with Anne Higonnet’s contention that ‘feminine images do not fail to

¹ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 170.

² Claudia Tobin, *Modernism and Still Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 4.

meet aesthetic criteria, but rather obey other criteria altogether'.³ What this alternative criterion consists of, and what affective and artistic possibilities emerge from it, will be at the centre of this thesis.

³ Anne Higonnet, 'Secluded Vision: Images of Feminine Experience in Nineteenth Century Europe', *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude (Nashville, TN: Westview Press, 1992), 171.

Introduction

‘An Archive of Feelings’: John, Bell, Sands and Gluck

This thesis is a feminist and queer study of the ways in which gender, subjectivity, domesticity and the cultures of interior space were articulated, interrogated and renegotiated by early twentieth century women artists. Through analysis of the work of artists Gwen John (1876-1939), Ethel Sands (1873-1962) Vanessa Bell (1879-1961) and Gluck (1895-1978), it examines how a broadly defined category of still life generated and reflected their gendered, sexual, and emotional identities in ways that might more broadly illuminate women’s lived experiences in the early twentieth century. As a means of recording the everyday concerns and desires of its makers, still life is understood as a privileged site of affective and social possibilities, or as ‘an archive of feelings’ in Ann Cvetkovich’s phrase.¹ Within this archive I explore a constellation of feelings united by their distance from the affective paradigms of modernity, including attention, tenderness, gratitude, happiness, attraction, comfort, tranquillity and empathy. These feelings are tied to the experiences of adjustment, adaptation, improvisation and restitution – in other words, making do and getting by – that mark the lives of marginalised subjects. The preoccupation that unites this work with feelings that touch, bind and make intimate gestures to a commitment to the formulation of more provisional, dynamic and intersubjective modes of self and sexuality that were better suited to the realities of women and queer subjects. The particular artworks by John, Bell, Sands and Gluck differ subtly but significantly from each other in aesthetic and political sensibilities, but taken together point to still life’s function as an artistic, affective and relational practice concerned, overall, with what it means to live within what Berlant terms the ‘institutions of intimacy’ across a diversity of domestic, metropolitan and rural spaces.² While positive affects are considered uninteresting at best and hegemonic at worst by a range of

¹ Ann Cvetkovich, *An archive of feelings: trauma, sexuality, and lesbian public cultures* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

² Berlant *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, 27.

feminist and queer critics,³ I will take seriously their circulation, and insist on the importance of certain gendered affective or social practices – such as care, love, and empathy – acknowledging without naturalising their centrality to women’s experience. Their artistic practices were driven by a desire to construct and articulate new identities, sexualities and communities. Each woman, through their own aesthetic and emotional strategies and to different extents, sought to queer still life – to actively remake the genre through queer affects, attachments and orientations – a capacity which Natalie Prizel reminds us is ‘aesthetic, ethical, and erotic.’⁴ I will therefore set aside the belief that any endorsement of domesticity by women must be considered either as a manifestation of false consciousness or a crushing concession to normativity.⁵

The *spaces between* of the thesis’s title refers to a geographical phenomenon – of artists moving across metropolitan and rural spaces – but also to a methodological interstices. This thesis will create scholarship that exists in the *spaces between* art historical disciplinary norms and the creative-critical experiments of queer and feminist work. Alongside more conventional mapping of socio-historical context and aesthetic influences, this thesis will dwell with artworks in a manner attentive to ‘practices of knowing, physical as well as mental, erotic as well as loving,’ in Elizabeth Freeman’s words, producing a series of ‘close readings that are, for most academic disciplines, simply too close for comfort.’⁶ The theoretical model that Freeman

³ Perhaps the most famous example of this at the intersection of queer and feminist theory is Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Durham, Duke University Press, 2010) which examines the social and cultural imperative, shaped by heteropatriarchy, to be happy. Ahmed invites the reader to reconsider happiness, which through heteronormativity, she argues, has become focused on the acquisition of planned, predictable markers of success; instead Ahmed argues for a return to the word’s etymological root in ‘chance’, a condition of possibility which she regards as outlining a queerer way of being. Work following what is known as ‘the Anti-social thesis’ in queer theory shares a similar distrust of positive affects: examples include Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and Leo Bersani’s *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), itself a text drawn from the anti-social thesis, dedicates its fourth chapter to ‘a feminism grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence’ (124). Halberstam includes Jamaica Kincaid (1949) as typical of this strand of feminist thought, whose statement ‘I am not at all—absolutely not at all—interested in the pursuit of happiness. I am not interested in the pursuit of positivity’ (132) is taken as the rallying cry for the texts of the chapter.

⁴ Natalie Prizel, ‘Beside Women: Charles Dickens, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Reparative Lesbian Literary History,’ *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2-3 (June 2018), 268.

⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii.

⁶ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xxi.

imagines as disruptively intimate, which she names ‘erotohistoriography,’ proceeds from the idea ‘that contact with historical material can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding.’⁷ Freeman’s methodology permits thinking centred around pleasure and emotion, and I will make use of this precedent, drawing out readings which connect biographical details with art historical traditions, what Freeman frames as legitimated modes of historical understanding, alongside moments in which paintings are taken as a medium to think with and feel with, as sites of affective possibility which make meaning in excess of their given context. These sections flirt with a question dear to queer theory’s radical intellectual project: what constitutes legitimate scholarship or critical writing, or, to use José Esteban Muñoz’s question, ‘who owns rigour?’⁸

This study focuses on the work of four artists, and I open by offering an explanation for the selection of John, Bell, Sands and Gluck as the organising principles of the thesis, illustrating why their practice of still life is of particular relevance and interest, both to one another and to questions about women’s art in this period in particular. The connection between John, Bells, Sands and Gluck is not only temporal, biographical and geographical – a case of identifying along similar lines in terms of sexual identity whilst living in, or passing through, the same metropolitans centres – but stylistic and thematic. These women were white, middle-class and queer (whether or not openly identifying as such) and this profoundly shaped their experiences and representations of interior space, to the extent that those spaces can be understood as constituting models of an ambivalently positioned subjectivity and sexuality. Their status as women artists lacking in recognition within the context of modernism, and their class positions and national identities, are also discussed as factors that bring them into dialogue with each other.

⁷ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 96.

⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, ‘Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,’ *Women and Performance*, Vol.8, No.2 (1996), 6.

The choice of 1900 to 1939 as the temporal scope of this thesis encompasses the height of the working lives of John, Bell, Sands and Gluck: John's first work was painted around 1898, Gluck's last work as late as the 1960s. Arguably, the forty year period I have selected is comprised of two distinct phases: the period before 1918, when the First World War ended, and the time between the 20s and 30s before the Second World War. Each of these case studies encompasses work that spans both periods, revealing subtle shifts in attitudes surrounding belonging, affect, sexuality and gender identity, which were influenced to varying extents by warfare and its consequences at home. However, my work will keep in mind how both queer and feminist historiography have questioned how period boundaries are determined, and as a result will not engage directly with discussion of war, or how a dramatic rhythm of warfare and peace reshaped society and, in turn, culture in the twentieth century. Feminist work has resisted organising historical events 'from the masculine point of view' in Alison Light's phrase, of which war is a primary example.⁹ 'Clearly women's history,' Light writes, 'lived, as it were, in a different place, need not run parallel to that of men, might follow connected but different paths.'¹⁰ The other story of the period, that which is more important to my thesis, is that of ongoing modernisation, or 'the excitement and release,' as Light puts it, of the new personal, social and professional opportunities – from daily servants to sanitary towels – that were emerging for middle class women like John, Bell, Sands and Gluck in metropolitan centres.¹¹

Working in London and Paris between the late 1890s and 1940s, John, Bell, Sands and Gluck were oppressed both in their everyday experiences as subjects and in their assertions of an artistic identity. Although often loosely connected to modernism – Bell with her Bloomsbury affiliation, in particular – they are rarely considered to be strong examples of its output, and are confined to the footnotes of canonical accounts, or regarded as idiosyncratic addendums to dominant narratives. These women were working in conditions where their access to education

⁹ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), 8.

¹⁰ Light, *Forever England*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

and networking spaces were limited, and where modernism's— strategies of exclusion and assimilation served to marginalise or erase their cultural practices. The obstacles faced by women artists hoping to participate in modernism will be thoroughly outlined later in this chapter, but for now I present art critics' responses to their work, both during their working lives and today, as paradigmatic of the trivialisation of women's contributions to modernism. Gwen John found considerably less fame than her brother Augustus, and only had one exhibition dedicated to her work – at the Chenil Galleries in London, 1926 – during her lifetime. Alicia Foster's research has powerfully challenged assumptions about John's melancholia and ascetism,¹² but Robert Storr remains typical in introducing John through derogatory or oversimplifying comments about her character: as an 'introvert' whose work 'neither grew nor deepened'.¹³ Nevertheless, John generally has a stronger critical reputation than the other women in this study and is well represented in public collections. In Bell's lifetime, critics often assumed her work was that of her partner Duncan Grant, who they believed was the stronger and more ambitious artist.¹⁴ This dismissal continues to reverberate in critical reassessment today: The London Review of Books began its review of the 2017 Vanessa Bell retrospective at Dulwich Picture Gallery by announcing that 'it seems to be a foregone conclusion that Vanessa Bell isn't much good.'¹⁵ Throughout his letters to Ethel Sands, now comprehensively catalogued and digitised at the Tate Archives – an honour not extended to Sands herself – Walter Sickert criticizes Sands's technique and subject matter, instructing her on how to improve her paintings in line with his own narrow preferences, and his interpretation of her work's value has, unsurprisingly given his continuing popularity amongst critics, endured. Sickert's dismissal of her work was at least polite, unlike Laura Cummings's assessment of her 'terrible chintzy studies' in her review of the 2017 Tate Britain show *Queer British Art*, with 'chintzy' presumably working as a contemporary euphemism

¹² See: Alicia Foster, *Gwen John* (London: Harry N. Abrams, 2016)

¹³ Robert Storr, *Modern Art Despite Modernism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 62.

¹⁴ Bridger Ann Elliot and Jo Ann-Wallace, *Women Writers and Artists: Modernist (im)positionings* (London: Routledge, 1994), 80.

¹⁵ Alice Spawls, 'At Dulwich.' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 39, No.10 (18 May 2017).

for the popular gendered dismissal, 'feminine'.¹⁶ Gluck was unique in receiving positive critical reception during her lifetime, and early fame in well-attended solo exhibitions at which she sold all her work, but she went on to spend decades in obscurity, and only in 2017 – first at The Fine Art Society, then at Brighton Museums – did Gluck find contemporary exhibiting space and acclaim.

While their gender may have positioned these women at the margins of modernism, in other important ways the women in this study were at the centre of modernism's nexus of production, and were at the forefront of discourses and institutions that promoted imperialist, nationalist, and racist agendas. Ethel Sands, the daughter of American socialites, and Gluck, the heir to the Lyons Tea Shop fortune, were wealthy enough to paint without the pressures of professionalization, and neither of them sold or exhibited widely during their lifetime. In her move from Knightsbridge to Bloomsbury, Vanessa Bell performed a severance from her prestigious English intellectual lineage; it is worth questioning, however, how meaningful this move was with regards to Bell's cultural capital and financial security. Indeed, Bell's association with the constellation of artists and writers known as The Bloomsbury Group guaranteed her work an audience, critical reception and market, and Bell wielded significant power in determining and disseminating her interpretation of modernist discourse. As too did Sands, if to a lesser extent: Sands was a hostess with a close friendship to Sickert, had a membership to the London Group (an influential movement of painters) – if with misogynistic conditions attached which limited her value and engagement within it – and owned homes in Oxford and the South of France at which artists frequently congregated. Gwen John, although born into a middle class family not radically unlike the other women of this study, spent most of her career living hand-to-mouth in precarious housing, unable to dedicate sufficient time to painting due to the

¹⁶ Laura Cummings, 'Indifferent Shades of Gay,' in *The Observer*, (9th April 2017) <www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/09/queer-art-tate-britain-review-laura-cumming> [accessed 8 January 2018]

necessities of wage labour. John relied upon the commissions and income of her collector John Quinn in a way the other women of this study would not have recognised.

Given this study's interest in domestic space and belonging, another crucial connection between these women is their itinerant status, their traffic through and between metropolitan centres, across the channel and into the country. The 'spaces between' in my title in part refers to this slippage and mobility between two major European cities – London and Paris – and their rural outskirts. John was born in Wales, moved to London to study at the Slade, and after moving between a series of squalid rented rooms around Bloomsbury, moved to Paris, where she lived intermittently for the rest of her life, not even returning to the safety of Britain during the First World War. On the death of her father, Bell moved from the Victorian gloom of South Kensington to the international bohemianism of Bloomsbury, but would later occupy a more marginal position in relation to the city's practices and groups on moving to the Charleston Farmhouse in the Sussex countryside. She too had a strong relationship to both French and Italian culture, and travelled widely in Europe. Sands was born in America to a wealthy society family, and moved to England as a child; she later divided her life between her London townhouse and an estate in the French countryside. Gluck was born of an American mother and English father into an illustrious Jewish business dynasty, and like many families who hailed from East End communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Glucksteins felt greater affiliation with a Jewish, émigré identity than with their Britishness.¹⁷ Gluck lived in Hampstead, but spent time in Cornwall in an artist's colony, and spent the last few decades of her life living in a country house in Sussex.

These women also occupied different points within a queerness defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender,

¹⁷ See: Alain Brossat and Syliva Klingberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism* trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017)

of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.¹⁸ The 'spaces between' of the title is therefore also a reference to the queerness of this thesis and its subjects. Sedgwick's definition of queerness through ideas about openness, instability and multiplicity is shared by Carla Freccero, who says of 'queer' that it constitutes 'a certain unsettling in relation to heteronormativity,' an unconventionality and obstinance in relation to norms arguably shared by the women of this study if to varying extents.¹⁹ Gluck – who dressed predominantly in masculine clothes and only ever sustained relationships with women – is perhaps the most readily identified with modern homosexual identity. She never married nor had children, and experienced a complex ambivalence about her gender identity (as well as her categorisation as a woman artist) to the extent that she wished to be known without a prefix. Bell is rarely considered queer, despite her romantic and artistic partnership with fellow artist Duncan Grant, whose queer identification formed part of their courtship and animated the life they shared. Bell's open marriage to Clive Bell and her interest in alternative kinship structures and sexualities are often side-lined by discussion of her enjoyment of motherhood, as if maternity and queerness were wholly incompatible, rather than – as Maggie Nelson has recently argued – alike conditions that feed into each other's alterity.²⁰ Historians, including Sands's biographer Wendy Baron, have been eager to classify Sands's lifelong relationship with artist Nan Hudson as a friendship between spinsters, although there is little to suggest it was not an erotic bond in the broadest sense – or, 'sapphic' as Woolf and contemporaries described it – or simply a love relationship rather than one of convenience (as is implied).²¹ John expressed passionate, erotic attachments to both genders, lived amongst women, painted almost wholly female subjects, and never married. Accounts of her affairs with women are scarce, and are frequently overshadowed by her explosive affair with sculptor Auguste Rodin, although many letters to a female neighbour in the

¹⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer and Now' in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 2-20.

¹⁹ Carla Freccero, 'Queer Times', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol.106, No.3 (Summer 2007), 487.

²⁰ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, Graywolf Press, 2015), 71.

²¹ See: Wendy Baron, *Miss Ethel Sands and her Circle* (London: Owen, 1977)

village of Meudon, with whom she was infatuated later on in life, are readily accessible amongst her papers. Biographical details illustrate that despite the very different paths their lives took, each of these women was, in Freeman's words, 'living aslant to dominant forms of object-choice, coupledness, family, marriage, sociability, and self-presentation.'²²

What I hope to have suggested in briefly looking at the subjectivities, sexualities, class positions and locales of these women, is that the connecting point between them, perhaps the most important for this thesis, is the ambiguity and ambivalence of their positions, the contradictions and inconsistencies that shaped their lives. This dissonance has consequently been reflected in their patchy critical receptions, the difficulty in laying claim to any of them through contemporary queer paradigms, and their uneasy or impossible place within the traditionally conceived art historical canon. They were not feminist enough, queer enough, or radical enough; they were also not considered original, skilled or successful enough. They did not, unlike some of their peers working in literature, use their art as a vehicle through which to resist and transform 'the ideologies of home and womanliness,' and yet their lives, as well as the very fact of their vocation, did much to question those traditional virtues and ideals.²³ These women have been hard to recover and difficult to take seriously because of qualities Amelia Jones's generously describes as 'the messy, uncontainable aspects of the artist's subjectivity'.²⁴ Susan R Suleiman usefully describes this position in relation to avant-garde women writers as one of 'double intolerability' in which their 'writing escapes not one but two sets of expectations/categorizations; it corresponds neither to the "usual revolutionary point of view" nor to the "woman's point of view."²⁵ Researching these women involves acknowledging their courage in refusing gender norms, as well as the experimental changes they made to traditional

²² Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*, xv.

²³ Light, *Forever England*, 10.

²⁴ Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism: a neurasthenic history of New York Dada* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 23.

²⁵ Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'A Double Margin: Reflections on Women Writers and the Avant-Garde in France' *Yale French Studies*, No. 75,(1988), 152.

genres, while accepting those convictions coexisted with their contradictory or unsavoury values, their disinterest in the period's defining social and political issues, as well as the lack of urgency around making or selling work enabled by their class position. It entails making do with the unknowns, awkwardness, or inexplicitness of their desires. There was John's idiom of religious submission and devotion, deeply incompatible with the spiritual scepticism that took its energy from late Victorian culture and permeated modernist discourse; not to mention the damaging affair – and its apparently crushing heteronormativity – with the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Bell and Sands were reliant upon domestic help, openly ambivalent about the debates raging over women's rights – certainly unwilling to imagine their female servants enjoying the same freedoms as their own – and articulated their indifference to and retreat from global politics, unlike many conscientious objectors in their circle. The closest Gluck came to an ideological commitment was her campaign against poor quality paint, a detail almost as embarrassing as her lifelong dependence upon her parents' fortune. While Beci Carver describes how modernist artists and writers understood 'modern-ness as a predisposition towards toil,' these women were far better acquainted with its opposite, leisure: they were on the whole well-fed and well-rested, slow-moving in their production of art and in their individual aesthetic progression, interested more in the pleasures of an artistic life than its difficulties.²⁶ Yet, I regard the more embarrassing and dissonant aspects of these women's work and life as an occasion to ask, in line with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick:

What if (instead) there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other? What if the richest junctures weren't the ones where everything means the same thing?²⁷

These women are 'intolerable', to use Suleiman's aptly charged adjective, to dominant, patriarchal accounts of modernism because of being queer women doggedly representing their own experiences and ignoring that which might more robustly guarantee them success and

²⁶ Beci Carver, *Granular Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

²⁷ Sedgwick, "Queer and Now" in *Tendencies*, 6.

acclaim. However, queer and feminist historians have not yet noticed or critical recuperated their work because of their ignorance, reticence, arrogance, and apathy.

This shared apathy or awkwardness in relation to class politics, feminism and queerness influences the final strand that draws John, Bell, Sands and Gluck together, which is their affective register. Their works all trade in idyllic representation of interiors, rendered in bright colours and in a conventional figurative style, an aesthetic which frequently stresses the harmoniousness, togetherness and stability of the scenes depicted. Nothing is experienced as wrong or unwanted in these scenes, and therefore nothing about them – the racial and class privilege they embody – is presented as subject to, or in need of, change. Happiness, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, is associated with some things more than others, and one scene it might be said to cling to – especially in the early twentieth century – is that of the serene, well-ordered, beautifully presented (heteronormative, white, middle class) domestic sphere.²⁸ Still life is full of objects that direct, determine and promise happiness, and – as Ahmed stresses – object is here used as a catchall term to include ‘values, practice, styles, as well as aspirations.’²⁹ The objects of still life are crockery, furniture and food, but they are also family, heteronormativity, a rigid gender binary and wealth accumulation, leisure, comfort and ease. However, the critical compulsion to minimise the presence of work that endorses conventional domesticity and an essentialised femininity does so at the expense of engaging with the complexity and ambivalence of these conservative investments. These artworks have much to articulate on what it meant to have, in Heather Love’s terms, a ‘disqualified identity’, or a subjectivity out of sync with the rhythms of progress.³⁰ Put simply, these works explore how it feels to want what you cannot have, or to long for something only to acquire it in a partial or compromised form. This kind of gendered, marginalised personhood appears less political in choosing to repair its immediate world and social sphere, living with and around injury and oppression, taking happiness where it

²⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 26.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

comes, and celebrating small pleasures. Accounts of modernism tend towards negative affects – histories of the discursive institutionalisation of melancholia, trauma and boredom abound – but John’s beloved rented rooms, Bell’s cheerful depictions of family life, Sands’s exquisitely decorated interiors and Gluck’s amorous outsized floral works give cause to reflect on contentment, gratitude, tenderness, absorption, sympathy, calm, complacency, sweetness, confidence and a range of other suggestive but underexamined positive affects.³¹ Ultimately, I see this attention to happiness as part of a drive ‘to take seriously people’s pull toward normative symbology without assuming that those so drawn in were stupid or brainwashed,’ to use Freeman’s phrase.³²

‘What can 6 apples not be?’: Still Life in the 20th Century

What did it mean to paint still life in the first decades of the twentieth century? An anecdote of Bloomsbury art collecting offers one possible answer. Between the 26th and 27th March 1918, John Maynard Keynes attended Edgar Degas’s studio sale at the Galerie George Petit in Paris. Keynes was there in the company of the Director of the National Gallery, for whom he had managed to acquire a £20,000 Exchequer grant, a sum made all the more salient by an art market depressed by wartime cautiousness. *Pommes* by Cézanne was amongst the lots, and after the National Gallery declined Keynes selected it to add to his growing collection of modernist art. After a brief spell in a bush on the side of the road running up to Charleston – Keynes forgot his prize in his eagerness to report the news of its acquisition to Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant – the painting was transferred to his Gordon Square home. The following month Keynes invited his friends to see the piece, among them Virginia Woolf. Woolf described in her diary the potential the group saw in in the canvas.

³¹ Some recent examples include: Sanja Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia Writing as Countermourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Allison Pease, *Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007).

³² Elizabeth Freeman, ‘Still After,’ *South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol. 106, No. 3 (2007), 495.

There are 6 apples in the Cézanne picture. What can 6 apples not be? I began to wonder. There's their relationship to each other, & their colour, & their solidity.... We carried it into the next room, & Lord! How it showed up the pictures there, as if you put a real stone among sham ones; the canvas on the others seemed scraped with a thin layer of rather cheap paint. The apples positively got redder & rounder & greener. I suspect some very mysterious quality of potato [?] in that picture.³³

For Woolf, the apples propose questions – ontological, phenomenological, and aesthetic – which extend beyond the fixed limits of the canvas, so much so that the frame is taken off the wall and carried across the room, as if attempting to activate and implicate the entire space in which it is situated. Although the Cézanne reveals other artworks to be 'sham' and 'thin,' it lends ordinary experience, the realm to which it is dedicated, a sudden thrilling potential. For Woolf, still life is not simply something to be looked at, but is also a way of looking and being that occasions an intensification of its subject and surroundings. The work is not a passive surface, but a being coiled up with emotion which acts powerfully upon its surrounding world. The painting invites the viewer to look away, to look around, to experience the contiguity of the painting with the social space that surrounds it, taking in an expanded aesthetic and emotional field. Woolf's looking is not detached or dispassionate, but constitutes an entire affective experience, so heady as to be equivalent to wine ('potation'), a sensation replicated by Woolf's ecstatically punctuated account of the incident in which each use of '&' gestures to a cumulative intoxication. Amidst this excitement, it is easy to miss that Woolf's listing of the picture's points of interest reads as a gloss of modernism's central tenets. Wondering at 'their relationship to each other, & their colour, & their solidity,' Woolf is struck by form rather than content: rather than identify the apple's possible symbolic associations – with, for instance, sin, as it might be in paintings from the Italian Renaissance to the English Pre-Raphaelites – she focuses solely upon the apple's heightened presence, its materiality and substance, its haptic and tactile qualities, its potential as a stimulant to the senses. Colour and shape might appear fixed in paint, but in fact

³³ Virginia Woolf and Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol.1, 1915-1919* (London: Hogarth, 1977), 140.

shift wildly under Woolf's scrutiny: the apples are alive, animate, bristling with movement, capable of directly addressing the viewer, subject to change according to their context. For all the theoretical potential of Woolf's description, her engagement with Cézanne's still-life is recorded with a detail and flair indicative of surprise. The opening accounting of the picture's basic parts ('6 apples') is followed by a rhetorical question that overturns the expectation implicit within such a description, a volte-face addressed to scale and significance that mimics the mind correcting itself, moving from a fixed assumption to a fresh curiosity. This showy introduction is then followed by a pair of equally dramatic gestures: the movement of the picture around the room, and the detailed, emotive tracing of that action with a series of clauses in a stream-of-consciousness style. All of it implies that Woolf did not expect to be so moved, a response which might be attributed to still life's poor critical reception.

Although 'interest in still life has been gradually rising,' to cite Hanneke Grootenboer's³⁴ optimistic opening to her study of the genre, such progress is only in the wake of centuries of marginalisation in which 'still life was always at the bottom of the hierarchy,' as Norman Bryson claims.³⁵ Bryson describes how still life emerged as a discrete, autonomous genre in European art at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and was consecrated in art historical scholarship as a distinct branch of painting by Joshua Reynolds in his seminal *Discourses* in the century that followed.³⁶ However, Bryson writes, the entry of still life into art historical narratives was accompanied by an insistence upon its lower status, as it came to assume a subordinate position in the academic hierarchy, situated below history, religious painting, landscape and portraiture.³⁷ Bryson states that assumptions about where value is located, motivated in part by dichotomies of the public/private sphere, for centuries obscured the genre's social, moral, economic, philosophical and technical codes. Through a series of close-readings of the genre, Bryson

³⁴ Hanneke Grootenboer. *The rhetoric of perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 4.

³⁵ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 2017), 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

contends that the basis of this discrimination was, and remains, overfamiliarity.³⁸ Still life takes as its subject the objects that constitute our everyday lives, but this ubiquity has been perceived as anathema to the complexity, profundity and heightened states associated with other genres. Not only is it a question of ordinariness, but as it is ‘the furthest remove from narrative, it is the hardest for critical discourse to reach,’ and it is this under-interpretation, as Bryson understands it, that this thesis is in part designed to address.

Margit Rowell, in the catalogue to her 1997 exhibition *Objects of Desire* – an exhibition on modern still life which remains the only major show of its kind – agrees with Bryson, but additionally suggests that the genre struggled to gain legitimacy and legibility in art historical scholarship as a result of a gendering of its style and production.³⁹ Despite the genre possessing theological and political connotations, Rowell explains how still life painting was often ‘assimilated to “woman’s work,” not only for the circumscribed skills it presumably entailed, but because of its depictions of the kitchen or dining room, seen as the woman’s workplace.’⁴⁰ Conceding the role played by gender in limiting the genre’s appeal, Rowell nevertheless includes very few women amongst her selected artists. Charlotte Christensen would not have approved of Rowell’s erasures: in her criticism of Bryson’s book, Christensen dismisses his brief attempt at including women in his study – the inclusion of a few examples of their work towards the end – arguing that women painters have carved out space for themselves within the genre for centuries.⁴¹ As Christensen argues, female still life painters in the 17th and 18th Century, particularly in the Dutch and Flemish tradition – painters such as Rachel Ruysch and Maria van Oosterwijck – ‘became very well-known and both affluent and highly respected.’⁴² Ruysch and her contemporaries, indeed all aspiring women painters in Western Europe until gender

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Margit Rowell, *Objects of Desire: the modern still life* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Charlotte Christensen, ‘A Look at the Over-Looked’. *Konsthistorisk Tidsskrift/Journal of Art History*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (1996), 137.

⁴² Ibid.

segregation was relaxed at the turn of the century, were banned from drawing from life on moral grounds, effectively preventing them from gaining professional status. Without the skills to effectively tackle human subjects, still life and botanical subjects came to be favoured by women and advocated for their use, in the process further reinforcing the status of the genre as the remit of amateurs and of women, categories that were still largely synonymous. The pooling of women's talents within still life and flower painting contributed and responded to a long historical moment where the divisions between public and private, as Griselda Pollock states, were mapped as a separation of masculine and feminine, which in turn were linked to a gendered binary in which femininity was yoked to nature and masculinity to reason.⁴³ Dedicating themselves to the minutiae of the domestic and natural world, women painters were also reproducing an idealist aesthetic discourse in which, as Naomi Schor shows, a 'detail/mass paradigm' echoed the paradigm of sexual difference.⁴⁴ Moreover, as Patricia Allmer observes, 'the commodification of women in artworks increasingly resembled the commodities represented in still lifes – goods which can be consumed and owned.'⁴⁵ Allmer goes on to argue that still life also functions to repress 'the female labour present in the needle work of table cloths, the preparation of represented foods and drink, the setting of the table and arrangement of flowers.'⁴⁶ In painting still life, therefore, women were unconsciously reproducing the very oppressive gendered binaries that so determined their position within the art world, and limited their choice of genre. The more still life they painted, the further they drifted from professionalisation, or successful careers as artists, and the firmer their place became within the drawing room, their sketchbooks balanced on their laps.

Still life painting could be said to have perpetuated women's limited horizons in the art world, but there were practical advantages to the genre that made it a possible outlet of creativity

⁴³ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2003) 75.

⁴⁴ Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: aesthetics and the feminine* (London: Methuen, 2007), 15.

⁴⁵ Patricia Allmer, 'Introduction' in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, ed. Patricia Allmer (London: Prestel, 2009), 23.

⁴⁶ Allmer, 'Introduction,' in *Angels of Anarchy*, 23.

for women who might otherwise not have painted at all. Still life featured simple objects that could be found amongst the settings middle-class women spent most of their time within. Still life was narrow enough in ambition to be immediately set aside when the obligations of family life resumed; there was no living model to compete for attention, time or financial resources; it was small format, and as such did not require a studio. It may not have been an equivalent challenge to the human form, but still life allowed women to experiment with shapes, colours, textures, a variety of subjects, and an array of symbolic motifs. Still life served a pedagogical role, therefore, in the development of women's practice, but was also experienced as a leisure activity equivalent to other domestic hobbies like embroidery and commonplace bookkeeping. Still life fit within domestic routines in part because it was so well suited to its affective dynamics, generating and reflecting an idealised femininity animated by sensitivity, delicacy and emotionality. In a similar fashion to other domestic craft activities, still life could memorialize sentimental objects, and circulate feelings of pride and pleasure in the home. Still life painting straddled the divide between professional and personal, public and private, mapping a way out of the home while simultaneously more firmly placing women within those very structures. Yet given the inevitably limited horizons white middle class women possessed, even a continued existence within the home under these altered, creative conditions brought about an immense shift in experience. Taken together, the usefulness and pleasure women derived from still life painting indicate that it might not just be taken as a symbol of female compliance, as Chloe Flower argues of Victorian women's use of samplers, or of adherence to socially imposed models of femininity, but could rather be viewed as a means of structuring female selves and articulating private feelings.⁴⁷ For women, still life painting could function as a private medium for identity practice and a 'public affirmation of feminine accomplishment,' in Flower's words,

⁴⁷ Chloe Flower, 'Wilful Design: The Sampler in Nineteenth-Century Britain,' *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 21, No.3, (2016), 303.

and was therefore a sphere in which meanings surrounding gender, subjectivity and labour were being constantly tested and contested.⁴⁸

Still life had for centuries been complicit in women's oppression as artists, but even those keenly felt limits were not as straightforward in their consequences (rather than their intent) as might first appear. While keeping the clear ideological limitations and historical abuses of the genre in mind, my own approach will be 'reparative', a mode drawn from the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick further explained later in this introduction, although the word's ordinary use is perhaps as illuminating in this context: 'intended to make amends for a wrong or harm done; compensatory' as the OED defines it.⁴⁹ The genre is understood within the thesis not as an expression of women's limited horizons, confirming what we already know about women and art in previous centuries, nor as evidence of the subsuming of their creativity within a trivial domestic imaginary, but as a space in which their identities found space for reification, reconstitution and expression.⁵⁰

Making it New? : Modernism

Woolf's giddy description of Cézanne appears spontaneous – given its informal tone, exclamatory language, and staccato syntax – but is in fact powerfully shaped by a social life steeped in the emerging discourse of modernism. Modernism has been commonly understood as a series of styles, practices and approaches borne out of late nineteenth century aesthetic movements, but which firmly took root and flourished in the early twentieth century. Eugene

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "reparative, adj. and n." OED online, Oxford University Press, May 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/162654. [accessed 14 May 2021]

⁵⁰ In terms of thinking reparatively, it is also worth noting, as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock observe of women painters of genre scenes in the Renaissance in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: I.B. Tauris, Co, 2013) that certain types of painting practised out of social necessity by women frequently became, at a later date, 'important spheres of art activity for men'. This was certainly the case for still life, which saw a revival of interest during the modernist period – as Rowell's 1997 exhibition explores – a phenomenon which could be partly traced back to Old Master examples of the genre, but might equally be attributed to women's work, both in amateur and professional realms, in the previous century. Even when women were practising under unjust, confining terms, therefore, they were making vital, prescient work which anticipated trends rather than existed outside of them, an aspect of this context which is rarely acknowledged.

Lunn summarises modernism through its key terms and stylistic modes as an aesthetic of self-consciousness, simultaneity, juxtaposition and montage; paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty; and the dehumanization of the subject.⁵¹ According to Lunn, it was through these strategic transgressions that modernism sought to destroy the old value systems of aesthetics, ethics and experience, and erect something entirely new. In her 1938 book *Picasso*, Gertrude Stein is typical in describing the ‘twentieth century’ as ‘a time when everything cracks, which is a more splendid thing than a period where everything follows itself.’⁵² Similarly, Woolf famously (if playfully) announced in her 1924 essay ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ that ‘on or around December 1910 human character changed.’⁵³ It is from Stein and Woolf’s paradigmatic characterisations of the period as a moment of cracking, turning, changing, diverging, revolutionising that critics like Beci Carver have come to understand ‘the essence of Modernism [...] as the aspiration towards novelty.’⁵⁴

However, in what follows I will map the arguments and counterarguments that have served to nuance this received idea of modernism, tracing with particular care discussion surrounding the political import of modernist innovation and the usefulness or validity of the term in describing a great diversity of styles, voices and activities. Contesting modernism’s value and meaning is revealing in so far as it illustrates how rarely women’s still life has fit the relevant aesthetic and ideological criteria. Briefly put, women’s still life is not daringly new enough where the imperative is to ‘make it new,’ in Ezra Pound’s famous tenet, largely because it refused to follow other artists in their move towards abstraction – and subsequently away from it. Because of their social and aesthetic conservatism, the middle class women who composed this group of painters have not yet featured in any of the redefinitions or expansions of modernist subjectivity. Ignoring these women is to fail to see how artists like Bell, John, Sands and Gluck were seeking

⁵¹ Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1984), 33-37.

⁵² Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1938), 9.

⁵³ Virginia Woolf, ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2009), 67-75.

⁵⁴ Carver, *Granular Modernism*, 6.

innovation within their art albeit in more subtle ways, infusing their work with radical new propositions about embodiment, affect and desire, which together constitutes a striking counternarrative of the period. Like Bridget Elliot and Jo Ann Wallace, therefore, I enter this dialogue more broadly to consider how ‘a fuller understanding of women’s position within modernism (might) alter our understanding of modernism as a discursive field.’⁵⁵

Woolf’s impassioned cataloguing of colour, shape, texture and solidity can be understood as following a formal reading of modernism, an allegiance that is unsurprising given formalism’s roots in the work of Woolf’s peers Clive Bell and Roger Fry, most saliently in Bell’s 1914 study *Art*. By this account, the ambition of art is the creation of an autonomous, self-referential art object that aspires towards ‘transcendent formal unity,’ as Marianne DeKoven states.⁵⁶ In his 1939 essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch,’ Clement Greenberg builds upon Bell’s work, proposing that modernism is defined by its ambition to investigate the nature of each artistic medium, thus rejecting both society’s ‘ideological division and its refusal to permit the arts to be their own justification.’⁵⁷ Within this framework, for painters to qualify as modernist they must demonstrate an eagerness to reinvent and rearrange spaces, surfaces, shapes and colours, and to advance explorations into ‘the ineluctable flatness’ of the canvas.⁵⁸ Modernism does not mount any explicit comment on the social conditions in which it is created, instead dedicating itself to an increasing self-consciousness of form, for as Rosalind Krauss explains, Greenberg believed that in the ‘withdrawal of each discipline into a sphere of sensory experience unique to it there was something positive, something utopian.’⁵⁹ According to Greenberg, such rigorous self-criticism and purification was necessary in order to counter the levelling effects of commercialism and mass production. Or, as Krauss elegantly phrases it, this desire for aesthetic

⁵⁵ Elliot and Wallace, *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)Positionings*, 3.

⁵⁶ Marianne DeKoven, *Rich and Strange: Gender, History and Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 12.

⁵⁷ Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions And Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. by John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 28.

⁵⁹ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7.

purity and autonomy was as much a desire for ‘a high ground uncontaminated by the instrumentality of the world of labour and science, a preserve of play and thus a model of freedom.’⁶⁰

Greenberg’s theory became a way of condensing a century of artistic practice and aesthetics into a single inexorable line of progression, grouped around a handful of western metropolitan centres in a model of what Paul Stasi calls ‘ahistorical internationalism.’⁶¹ This ‘linear evolutionary development,’ in Frances Spalding’s words, follows Manet as he transforms into Rothko, and before Impressionism as it prefigures the compression of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism.⁶² What united this work was the gradual elimination of narrative content and figurative representation, and so modernist discourse came to naturalise the turn towards pure abstraction. As Greenberg writes, a consequence of the disciplinary purity forwarded by formalism was that, ‘subject matter or content [became] something to be avoided like the plague.’⁶³ It was this notion of modernism’s ‘anti-mimetic destiny,’ as Rancière puts it, which brought about a dichotomy of artistic value that framed formal experimentation as the only authentically aesthetically valuable practice, stigmatizing those who continued to find meaning in traditionally representational forms.⁶⁴ From this perspective, which implicitly aligned radical aesthetics with left wing politics, any concessions made to art’s earlier depictive functions were interpreted as evidence of dark, politically regressive tendencies.⁶⁵ Benjamin Buchloh argues that political oppression, conservative ideologies and a cynicism about the demands of the art market precipitated the ‘breakdown of the modernist idiom’ and a ‘craving for restoration of the visual codes of recognisability.’⁶⁶ He links the new classicism of artists like Picasso to ‘an idealization of the perennial monuments of art history and its masters’ and a ‘respect for cultural

⁶⁰ Ibid. p.8.

⁶¹ Paul Stasi, *Modernism, Imperialism and the Historical Sense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

⁶² Frances Spalding, *British Art Since 1900* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 8.

⁶³ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 10.

⁶⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. by Gabriel Rockhill (London Bloomsbury, 2003), 4.

⁶⁵ Robert Storr, *Modern Art Despite Modernism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 31.

⁶⁶ Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression,’ *October*, Vol. 16 (1981), 39.

tradition' that would ultimately accommodate, even enable, a proto-fascist society.⁶⁷ Buchloh's assessment probably holds true for the masculine avant-garde he deems worthy of investigation. However, his own study is typical in failing to mention women artists and the stake they might have in figurative language, those like John, Bell, Sands and Gluck who never meaningfully strayed from conventional representational practices, and for whom a place within the avant-garde was almost impossible, removing the community, motivation and context for both radical aesthetics and their withdrawal. What did the art historical canon mean to women who had never felt seen or accepted by its repertoire of images – whatever it was, it was certainly not the safe, flattering world of timeless brotherhood and genius which male modernists presumably accessed through it. To say that the seductive idea of a shared tradition did not have the same political valence for women is almost too obvious to state, but it bears repeating. Judged politically and aesthetically nefarious, little critical space was afforded to figurative work in the decades that followed, and with that came an ideologically charged and devastating burial of women's art, a failing this thesis's emphasis directly speaks to.

Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry describe how the flattening of artistic practices enacted by Greenberg's definition of modernism was not a neutral means of organising material, but aimed to hierarchise, and succeeded in 'expelling as impure women's artistic practice and production from the cultural field of modernism.'⁶⁸ Bridget Elliot and Jo Ann Wallace add further detail to this masculine and monological formalism, pointing to Greenberg's fixation with historical and cultural impasse, asking 'whose culture is threatened? Is a modernist sense of historical impasses shared or is it gender, class and race specific?'⁶⁹ Culture is not designed to be accessed or added to by all subjects in the given social world, and the ways in which certain subjects select, adhere to or adapt cultural forms, as well as their investment in their circulation

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry, 'Modern women, modern spaces: women, metropolitan culture and Vorticism' in *Women and Modernism* ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 41.

⁶⁹ Elliot and Wallace, *Women Artists and Writers*, 8.

and endurance, is ineluctably conditioned by structural elements. In making this clear Elliot and Wallace more broadly highlight the entanglement of the cultural, social and political. Claiming to make an art entirely independent of social experience neglects, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, the ways in which the cultural necessarily participates in or reflects the political, and how ‘specifically aesthetic conflicts about the legitimate vision of the world [...] about what deserves to be represented and the right way to represent it, are political conflicts.’⁷⁰ Krauss articulates a condensed iteration of this idea in her belief that modernism’s autonomy is evidence of ‘thinking they can bracket it (art) off from the world, from its context, from the real.’⁷¹

The exclusion of women from accounts of modernist art was mirrored in their subsidiary presence in discussions of modernity, a field which has traditionally been dominated and defined by male critical theorists. Bourdieu’s refocusing of attention upon what he terms ‘the field of cultural production’ illustrates how aesthetic forms arise from particular places in response to particular social formations, and thus stresses the need to look at the materiality, sociality and sexuality of the field of modernism in relation to modernity. Modernity (as a sociological category) is a notion as complex and disputed as modernism (an aesthetic category). Briefly put, the late nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century was marked by accelerating and pervasive conditions of change, including – to use Susan Friedman’s analysis – ‘intensified and alienating urbanization; the cataclysms of world war and technological progress run amok; the rise and fall of European empires; changing gender, class, and race relations; and technological inventions that radically changed the nature of everyday life, work, mobility, and communication.’⁷² This dynamic field of social change has frequently been reduced to a single gendered meaning or logic: despite the radical transformations to women’s lives, the experience of masculinity in the urban centre has become the essential mode and site of change in

⁷⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods,’ *Media, Culture and Society*, trans. Richard Nice, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1980), 261-293.

⁷¹ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 12.

⁷² Susan Freidman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 51.

demarcating and defining the modern.⁷³ Charles Baudelaire's autonomous, alienated male subject, who walks the city and experiences reality as 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent' is a paradigmatic image in this context.⁷⁴ Baudelaire's flâneur is wrought by modernity's contradictions: he is a subversive figure, a bastion of unproductivity amidst a city governed by capital, bureaucracy and authorial power; but he is also an embodiment of bourgeois individualism, a force inseparable from the will to power, and the subjugation not simply of nature, but of the undifferentiated masses from which the flâneur is so vividly repelled. Women function as conduits of castration anxiety that threaten to subsume the aggressive, competitive masculine subjectivity.⁷⁵ Marshall Berman's book, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, is perhaps the most famous proponent of this masculine identified modernity. Berman describes modernity as a 'body of experience' that 'pours us all into a perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.'⁷⁶ Stuart Hall agrees, proposing that 'essential to the idea of modernity is the belief that everything is destined to be speeded up, dissolved, displaced, transformed, reshaped.'⁷⁷ For Fredric Jameson the 'quintessential modernist' is 'passionately committed to the eruption of the genuinely, the radically, and, dare one even say it, the authentically New.'⁷⁸ As with formalist descriptions of modernist aesthetics, these critics rely upon tropes of novelty, invention and revolution, but employ these notions with a focus on problems intrinsic to the social rather than to each artistic medium. Understood in these terms, as David Corbett writes, modernism in fact runs counter to its core tenets as outlined by formalism – the separation of art and life – and, instead, 'aims at social engagement and relevance through a repudiation and critique of society.'⁷⁹ Peter Bürger's work on the avant-

⁷³ With some notable exceptions, such as Rita Felski's *Gender and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), for instance, which is dedicated to challenging male-centred readings of the modern.

⁷⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964), 12.

⁷⁵ Lauren Elkin's recent study *Flaneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (2017) directly responds to this vision of womanhood, as well as its implicit exclusion of women from urban space, as it explores an alternative genealogy of women walking the city in the century after Baudelaire.

⁷⁶ Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (London: Verso, 1983), 15.

⁷⁷ Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben, *Formations of Modernity* (London: Polity Press, 1992), 15.

⁷⁸ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), 4.

⁷⁹ David Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 42.

garde is instrumental in this reading: ‘the European avant-garde movements can be defined,’ he writes, ‘as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society.’⁸⁰ Thomas Crow articulates something similar when he argues that the avant-garde performed a transgression of social boundaries that reached the bourgeois world beyond as ‘extreme, opaque, inexplicably evasive and, for that reason, hostile.’⁸¹ However, many critics struggled to align this belief with the knowledge that the ‘bourgeoisie, butt and nominal enemy of the avant-garde, was also its main audience,’ to borrow Robert Hughes’s phrasing.⁸² Some began distinguishing ‘modernism’ from ‘avant-garde’ in a way that invested the latter with a more authentic form of resistance, aligning the former with an aesthetic and political orthodoxy. Such distinctions belie, however, the difficulty of untangling the forces of opposition from the status quo. Andreas Huyssen points to this blurring of boundaries when he writes that ‘like a parasitic growth, conformism has all but obliterated the iconoclastic and subversive thrust of the historical avant-garde of the first three or four decades of this century.’⁸³ Modernism’s claims to boldness and hostility might even be understood as a canny marketing strategy: far from absolutely resisting co-option, as Lawrence Rainey notes, the modernist ‘work of art invites and solicits its commodification.’⁸⁴ Terry Eagleton likewise observes the ‘devastating irony’ by which ‘the modernist work escapes from one form of commodification only to fall prey to another,’ highlighting how readily the aesthetics of modernism were assimilated by advertising and mass culture.⁸⁵ Elaborating on Eagleton’s point, Jess Matz demonstrates how montage, abstraction, and even the principles of Impressionism became part of ‘advertising’s formal mystifications.’⁸⁶ Stasi says of this trend that

⁸⁰ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 35.

⁸¹ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 21.

⁸² Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 375.

⁸³ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 3.

⁸⁴ Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 3.

⁸⁵ Terry Eagleton, ‘Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism’ in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. by Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (London: Phaidon, 1992), 93.

⁸⁶ Jesse Matz, ‘Cultures of Impression’ in *Bad Modernism*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 302.

‘here we find a modernism no longer in opposition to mass culture, market society, or the publishing industry, but rather, defining itself through an appropriation of and, at times, direct participation in those discourses from which it most sought to distance itself.’⁸⁷

The diverse critical threads brought together in studies of modernism summarised here together confirm what might appear self-evident: that modernism is not a straightforward record of twentieth century culture, but a manifestation of what Raymond Williams calls ‘the selective tradition,’ in which culture is powerfully determined by the ideologies and actions of those with the power to publish, promote and propound their interpretations of art.⁸⁸ Working from Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony, Williams describes how institutions select, maintain and negotiate what forms enter culture, and subsequently become definitive parts of a tradition, and how this is motivated by the social, economic and cultural values of the most powerful formations in society.⁸⁹ In a society structured by sexism, racism and nationalism, only work that functions to support or disseminate (however implicitly or explicitly) white, patriarchal ideology counts as significant art practice. Williams’s model radically questions the claims to resistance and transgression made by (white, male) artists who are safely ensconced in the modernist canon. Further, if one of the central tenets of modernism is understood to be aesthetic and political transgression, then Williams’s structure highlights how differently transgression might mean to different subjects, or how available or desirable such action is to those without power. Thinking in this manner allows us to challenge the ‘simple heroics’ of the avant-garde that Amelia Jones has urged we question.⁹⁰ Heather Love, following Williams and in line with Jones’s project, is eager to stress that notions of boundary crossing and exile differ enormously according to one’s relationship to the centre. ‘The meaning of modernist transgression,’ Love writes, ‘depends to a great extent on which way you are headed: it is one thing to light out for the Territory, and

⁸⁷ Stasi, *Modernism, Imperialism and the Historical Sense*, 2.

⁸⁸ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), 39.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Jones, *Irrational Modernism*, 19.

something different, after all, to live there.⁹¹ Queers, women, people of colour, and other marginalised groups would perhaps not have regarded transgression as quite so abstract or easy to return from, or regarded the fight against the forces of industrial capitalism as quite so urgent, appealing or glamorous. Marginality was always more than an aesthetic exercise, a heroic gesture or a performance: it was lived – struggled through, adapted to at great personal cost, at resented – and more readily ceded for the safety and lures of the centre.

In briefly outlining how diverse and at times contradictory definitions of modernism have emerged it is clear that modernism is a discursive structure mired by what Pamela L. Caughie describes as ‘definitional confusion.’⁹² This is how modernist art has, at once, been understood as isolated from socio-political concerns and entirely embroiled within them, a radical means of addressing, figuring and furthering the defining issues of modernity or a conservative retreat from those problems. Modernity is similarly as likely to be deployed as a byword for stability, progress and disciplinary power as it is used as an allusion to discontinuity, fragmentation and collapsed certainties regarding space, temporality and subjectivity. As Friedman asks, ‘just what IS modernism in an exchange where the word means not just different things, but precisely opposite things?’⁹³ Many critics have questioned whether the early twentieth century was anymore defined by rupture than any other period of history, or have emphasised, like Jessica Burnstein, that ‘the idea of the new is, as we have seen, an old idea.’⁹⁴ The notion of modernism/modernity might therefore merely illustrate that, as Friedman says of it, ‘definitional activities are fictionalizing processes.’⁹⁵ To fictionalise, however, at least suggests some coherence, while these competing descriptions are hugely obfuscating: even attempting to synopsis critical accounts of modernism/modernity is a frustrating exercise in which it not only feels as though one were contradicting oneself, inexorably muddying the discursive waters, but

⁹¹ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 4.

⁹² Pamela L. Caughie, *Disciplining Modernism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 4.

⁹³ Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*, 51.

⁹⁴ Jessica Burnstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2012), 28.

⁹⁵ Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*, 51.

also failing to contribute or illuminate much on key questions about what culture was like, and why it was like that, in the early twentieth century. Modernism and modernity are simplified structures that offer compelling but ultimately misleading narratives of progression, and are too entrenched within dominant power structures to reveal much more than how those very mechanisms of power function. Modernism as a term may tell us a particular story about epistemology, or how history is formulated with certain subjects in mind, but it is otherwise, as Andrew Thacker asserts, ‘an empty signifier’, or as Rancière puts it, ‘an incoherent label.’⁹⁶

It goes without saying that modernism and modernity continue to serve a function within scholarly communities, not least because period boundaries establish workable parameters for academic projects. Thinking about the usefulness of a concept like modernism, I am put in mind again of Sedgwick, who describes being drawn to ideas that are ‘not dramatic or caricatural, certainly not dualistic (never dualistic), but big, big and palpable [...] ideas where you can do a lot of different things with them and be in many relations to them, but they’ll push back against you.’⁹⁷ Sedgwick’s comment, and this tarrying amongst contesting critical narratives naturally begs its own questions: for what reason is my own project drawn to the idea or category of modernism? One answer, of course, is that modernism is ‘big, big and palpable’ in studies of this period, and – more importantly – it is only in understanding how the evaluative criteria of modernism has been established, disseminated and maintained that works which have failed to meet its standard can be recovered. Indeed, the version of modernism that concerns me here is that which continues to operate outside of these redefinitions.⁹⁸ What artists, artworks and genres still appear uninteresting, conservative or backward in light of the inexhaustible expansions of what constitutes modernism? Who did not consider themselves politically and aesthetically radical, and who did not associate with the avant-garde groupings that secured a

⁹⁶ Andrew Thacker, *Geographies of Modernism: Literature, Cultures, Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2005), 9.

⁹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes’ in *The Weather in Proust* (Durham: Durham University Press), 125.

⁹⁸ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, ‘Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New’ in *Bad Modernism* ed. by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 2.

position in the canon? Who, as a consequence, remains under-theorised and over-simplified in accounts of art history? Who did not care – who did not need to – about commercial success? Who had little interest in making an art in opposition to bourgeois social or artistic forms? If modernism might be summarised in the form of a Vorticist painting – in which ideas about abstraction, urbanity, speed, masculinity and technology churn – then how should we think about still life painted by women, saturated with stillness and structured by domestic practices?

‘Women can’t write, women can’t paint’: Women artists in the early 20th Century

Feminist analysis has been particularly powerful in highlighting the similarities between dominant discourse and aesthetic counter discourse: both are fixated upon a heroic, embattled masculinity, and function as a rejection of affects or experiences coded as feminine, such as feeling, emotion and sentiment.⁹⁹ Feminist criticism illustrates that there may be, in Matei Calinescu’s formulation, ‘two modernities’ – bourgeois rationalization on one hand, and radical art on the other – but that these modernities are co-constitutive formations that perpetuated the continued marginalization of oppressed subjects.¹⁰⁰ Feminist art historians have repeatedly stressed how the restrictions of sexual difference blocked women’s attempts at articulating their position from outside the masculine normative paradigms of avant-garde theory and practice. Although, as Amelia Jones points out, ‘art history has been very slow to accommodate such a feminist impulse,’¹⁰¹ revisionist accounts of artistic movements eventually emerged out of broader feminist scholarly activities and illustrated the pervasiveness of certain obstacles and erasures, which range from explicit misogyny to subtler modes of oppression and exclusion.¹⁰² These early studies focused upon acts of historical excavation, what Adrienne Rich famously describes as ‘re-

⁹⁹ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 17.

¹⁰⁰ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 41.

¹⁰¹ Jones, *Irrational Modernism*, 10.

¹⁰² See: Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: the fortunes of women painters and their work* (London: Picador, 1981); Shulamith Behr, *Women Expressionists* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1988); Gillian Perry, *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde: modernism and ‘feminine’ art 1900 to the late 1920s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction,’ a literary principle applicable to art history.¹⁰³ These studies made vital amends to the obliteration and trivialisation of women’s artistic practice, and as Rich’s stresses, were always more than an intervention into culture, functioning rather as an ‘act of survival’ for women past and present.¹⁰⁴ Without diminishing the importance of these pioneering studies, these accounts perhaps misleadingly level the field of modernist production to a hegemonic masculine monological position from which women were entirely excluded. Further, by attending solely to traffic between the centre and the margins, too much stock has been placed in distinguishing between dominant and marginal modernisms, when, as Heather Love reminds us, ‘it is also important to remember how difficult it can be, in any given case, to tell the difference.’¹⁰⁵ Love’s argument is that many women – like John, Bell, Sands and Gluck – may have experienced significant oppression in some ways, but not in others: for white middle class women, the tyrannies of gender were always mediated through their privileged race and class position. To state that these women were either at the centre or on the margins – definitively, absolutely and always – is to miss the fascinating contradictions inherent to their position and its effect on the kind of artistic subjectivity and practice possible to them.

Ruth Hemus is possibly thinking about these pressures and differences when she points out that ‘despite claims that the rediscovery of women artists has been exhausted, there is still much to be researched, written and learnt about individual women or groups of women.’¹⁰⁶ Current feminist criticism of modernism, of which Hemus’s study is typical, thinks critically about the intersecting planes of women’s identities, and lays greater emphasis on women’s agency, exploring the rich and varied ways in which women carved out space within a polyvocal and heterogeneous cultural output. In this manner, Marsha Meskimmon argues that ‘women

¹⁰³ Adrienne Rich, ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,’ *College English*, Vol.34, No.1 (October 1972), 19.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 11.

¹⁰⁶ Ruth Hemus, *Dada’s Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 12.

were not passive victims of constructions of women within modernism,' and explores how women's artwork was crucial in redefining the typologies of 'woman' that characterised Weimar visual culture.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Paula J. Birnbaum examines how women deployed and experimented with signifiers of femininity – such as motherhood, domesticity, and fashion – while appealing and alluding to key themes in the Western art historical canon.¹⁰⁸ Meskimmon, Hemus and Birnbaum share a desire to examine on a larger scale where women were practicing and what they were producing, rather than continuing a tradition in which single, exceptional women are slowly added to the existing canon. By insisting upon the marginality of women artists, these studies argue, the realities of women's growing professional status are obscured: women were earning their living from art in greater numbers, undertaking commissions, producing work for exhibitions and having their work bought by major museums. They insist that women were active in the making of meaning in culture across Europe: women wrote books, articles, edited journals, produced art, mass media imagery and fashion; they were discerning readers, gallery and theatre goers and consumers of new products.¹⁰⁹ It is true that women were marginalised within mainstream institutions, lacked equal economic and political power, and were largely occluded from the realm of cultural articulation; however, in overstating this position the diverse artistic practices, experiences and voices that women forged for themselves in the modern period have been erased. To paraphrase Hemus, feminist critics must be wary of framing the exclusion faced by twentieth century women artists as a problem of presence, or 'contribution' as she puts it – the idea that women were completely unable to make art – when it was in fact much more a problem of perspective and attention, of 'visibility and acknowledgement.'¹¹⁰

It is with this recent body of feminist art history in mind that my thesis considers certain questions. What were the socio-economic realities (or advantages) for middle class women

¹⁰⁷ Marsha Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁰⁸ Paula J. Birnbaum, *Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities* (London: Routledge, 2011), 14.

¹⁰⁹ Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough*, 13.

¹¹⁰ Hemus, *Dada's Women*, 4.

aspiring towards professional artistic careers and financial independence? What were the possibilities – creative and intersubjective – for women hoping to practice as artists as the early twentieth century began? In the last decade of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century, the contestation and reconfiguration of gender roles was a key component in the process of differentiation from traditional social formations. The accelerating pressure regarding women’s access to education, professional life, and to political agency through the vote – which was granted to women in Britain over the age of 30 who either owned property or were married to property owners in 1918 – was embodied by the popular trope of the ‘New Woman,’ who became a symbol of emancipatory potential and utopian futurity and featured across high culture and mass media of the period.¹¹¹ The ‘New Woman’ had different ambitions, an altered appearance, and newly liberated desires: she was a vision of another kind of life, a brighter and more fulfilling future. The declining birth rate, the rise of artificial contraception, and an increased openness in public on issues of reproductive health, meant that family sizes fell by a third between the 1860s and the late 1920s.¹¹² Educational reform ensured that female literacy increased from about 50 percent in 1843 to almost 93 percent in 1891.¹¹³ Even changes in women’s fashion towards more androgynous styles radically altered public and private perceptions of women. Women were entering professional life in greater numbers, taking on roles in offices and shops, and going home each evening to rented rooms, which they occupied alone, a new form of living which was becoming standard in metropolitan centres. Women were now making money, and without dependents – as the war had created a surplus of unmarried women – they were in possession of a disposable income, which they were spending on newly available leisure activities, such as magazines, cinema, radio and sports.¹¹⁴ Living alone, women were socialising more freely, taking lovers or otherwise operating outside of traditional kinship

¹¹¹ Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 17.

¹¹² Jesse Wolfe provides thorough data on family sizes and marriage rates in the appendix of their study. See: Jesse Wolfe, *Bloomsbury, Modernism and the Reinvention of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 200-210.

¹¹³ Selina Todd, *Young women, work and family in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

¹¹⁴ Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out* (London: Penguin, 2008), 5.

structures and, as Rosemary Betterton argues, the ‘more open, complex and mobile social relationships gave to women a degree of freedom which they could not experience within the confines of a more traditional environment.’¹¹⁵ In short, life for women – especially middle class white women – was improving: it was becoming richer and freer, with less of a fixed sense of what was to come, both more networked in terms of sociality and more independent, no longer so beholden to the patriarch of their families. Women’s selves and worlds were expanding. Or, as Laura Doan puts it with reference to the catalysing effects of the First World War, ‘in response to the rapid changes in living and working conditions at home and in the zones of conflict, both women and men had become something other than their pre-war selves.’¹¹⁶

Despite the optimistic nature of this summary, it is important to remember what problems remained as the 1910s moved through into the 1930s. Reforms brought about by feminist political activism were, as Sally Alexander points out, partial, and ‘real changes in women’s lives release from child-bearing, poverty, dependence on fathers and husbands proved difficult and slow to achieve.’¹¹⁷ This distinction between real change and mere gesture, lived experiences and myth, can be observed in an anecdote regarding Bloomsbury Group stalwart Lytton Strachey and its apparent role in embodying and reflecting shifting attitudes towards sex. Encountering the recently wed Vanessa Bell, he reportedly pointed to a stain on her white dress and asked: ‘Semen?’¹¹⁸ Strachey’s crude comment caused, or so Woolf describes it, the floodgates to open in their personal lives: it seemed now as though any desire could be articulated, its emotional and bodily particulars dissected, even actually acted upon. A roughly contemporaneous anecdote told by Bell reports with amusement how Woolf, perhaps inspired

¹¹⁵ Rosemary Betterton, ‘Women artists, modernity and suffrage cultures in Britain and Germany, 1890-1920’ in *Women Artists and Modernism* ed. by Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 19.

¹¹⁶ Laura Doan, ‘Topsy-Turvydom Gender Inversion, Sapphism, and the Great War,’ *GLQ*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2006), 518.

¹¹⁷ Sally Alexander, ‘Room of One’s Own: 1920s Feminist Utopias,’ *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2000), 275.

¹¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: unpublished autobiographical writings* ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976), 213.

by Strachey's candour, outrageously shouted 'afterbirth' at a man during a dinner party.¹¹⁹ Jesse Wolfe outlines the kinds of doubts these seemingly inconsequential, momentarily scandalous speech acts elicited:

What are men and women like: is there a clear division between them? Is there a clear division between same-sex and opposite-sex desire? Between friendship and romance? Can religion or "nature" tell us how to cultivate or manage our desires? Are normal desires the same thing as "healthy" ones?¹²⁰

In comparison to the Victorian period, Wolfe argues, there was less certainty and more thrilling possibility over the answers to these questions.¹²¹ However, this liberation did not meaningfully spread beyond the parameters of Gordon Square. Further, the group's candour was intended to mark their exceptional status, appealing to fantasies about themselves as socially, culturally and artistically innovative, and therefore cannot necessarily be taken as firm evidence of how their desires were experienced and shared. Indeed, even amongst their allies, and despite the tone of the stories they circulated about themselves, their feeling of liberation was not total. The 'Angel in the House', a domesticated feminine ideal of submission and self-sacrifice consecrated by Coventry Patmore's 1853 poem, continued to hold sway in how women across classes conceived of themselves, radically curtailing their ambitions and horizons, so much so that Woolf famously called for her murder in her 1931 essay 'Professions for Women'.¹²² Beyond Bloomsbury, the discourses addressed to desire – contemporary sexology and psychoanalysis – often aspired towards the reinscription of masculinity and femininity, and were rarely sensitive to any forms of difference, to frustration or hesitation or excess, let alone to queerness. Indeed, their popularity came from their promise to resolve, rather than accommodate, differences in how subjects

¹¹⁹ Tate Archive, TGA 20078/1/44/2, Vanessa Bell to Duncan Grant, 1910.

¹²⁰ Woolfe, *Bloomsbury, Modernism, and the Reinvention of Intimacy*, 64.

¹²¹ Whether or not this movement from suppression to liberation is an accurate vision of how sexuality has developed, indeed whether - following Michel Foucault's pioneering work on the 'repressive hypothesis' – this idea of rupture is in fact a convenient fiction, is unfortunately not within the scope of this thesis. It is enough, perhaps, to state that the proliferation of discourses around sexuality – what Foucault traces back to the seventeenth century – continued apace in the twentieth century, assisted (and perhaps even accelerated) by new technologies around sexual health, greater literacy, and the chance many now had to live alone prior to marriage, amongst other social changes highlighted in this introduction.

¹²² Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women' in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140-146.

experienced their gender or sexual identities. The publication of Marie Stope's 1918 sex manual, *Married Love*, has also been heralded in bringing about of a new frankness regarding sexual manners – constituting a more public iteration, one might suggest, of Strachey's speech act – even if this was perhaps most true for its intended audience, which was distinct from the women in this thesis: married heterosexual women without any access to information about sex or relationships structured around intimate, candid conversation.

Just as women's lives were improving, if with certain caveats, the prospects and choices for a woman hoping to make a life in art continued to be shaped by an oppression too entrenched to be swept away by the century's changes. Katy Deepwell's extensive study of census material between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century illustrates that large numbers of women were working as artists in England during this period: in 1921, 36.75 percent of individuals recorded as working as 'painters, sculptors, engravers' were women, amounting to 1,708 self-proclaimed women artists.¹²³ Not only were more women working, but they were also developing, as Rosemary Betterton argues, 'representations of their diverse experiences of modernity that took different forms to those which characterised contemporary avant-garde practice.'¹²⁴ Yet, despite their increasing numbers, many of the radical exhibitions in the first decades of the twentieth century failed to adequately represent women artists, and women rarely enjoyed an equivalent amount of popular reportage. The reasons for this go beyond straightforward trivializations of women's work, an opinion Woolf has her cipher of middle class male ignorance express in her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*: that is, 'women can't write, women can't paint'.¹²⁵ Rather, the continued invisibility of women was a product of the networks and discourses through which art of that moment flourished. In metropolitan centres like London and Paris, networks that convened around public exhibitions, cafes, salons, studios, intellectual

¹²³ Katy Deepwell, *Women Artists Between the Wars: 'A Fair Field and No Favour'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) 57-69.

¹²⁴ Betterton, 'Women artists, modernity and suffrage cultures in Britain and Germany, 1890-1920,' in *Women Artists and Modernism*, 23.

¹²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), 86.

and artistic discussion groups and bars were crucial in the circulation of art and ideas, and in the promotion of individual personalities and careers. However, these spaces were dominated by men, and while they were not necessarily strictly gender exclusive, they were almost always inaccessible to women one way or another; even if women found themselves in such a space, their atmosphere was determined by extravagant performances of heteromascularity – verbal sparring and physical fights – the kind which sought to bring certain kinds of men closer while alienating everyone else. Further, the individual philosophies, aesthetics and avant-garde manifestoes of male artists linked to the London scene in the early twentieth century often explicitly centred upon narrowly perceived aspirational qualities of masculinity, such as violence, virility and free-will, all of which came tinged with misogyny. Many women at the turn of the century could still not traverse the city unchaperoned, but even if they were able to enter these spaces alone, comfort or acceptance – or indeed any relevant stimulus in terms of their own practice – were far from guaranteed. Where did women artists find space in which to paint, share ideas, write, read, and collaborate? Of interest to my study are the alternative networks, aesthetics and gendered affective paradigms that women were engaged in creating and sustaining in these spaces. Rather than address the ways in which women accessed urban space as artists, my thesis will look to marginal, liminal spaces at the borders of the social centres of the period, spaces that were private, and often sought out urgently under the duress of creative or personal necessities. Bedrooms, lounges, bedsits, studios, and gardens, are all ‘intimate cultures’ in which webs of co-operative, mutually supportive, female-centric art practices could flourish.

This thesis will also endeavour to address the work of women artists from an intersectional perspective, with a particular attention to how growing awareness of gender at the turn of the century ran concurrent with, if at times in combative relation to, increasing class-consciousness. Class analysis is not at the core of this thesis, but, like Alison Pease, I am interested in how an ‘increasingly visible, and indeed vocal, working class presented more challenges to any standard model of what constituted a life worth attending to; that is,

traditionally, a life with political, historical, or aesthetic potential.¹²⁶ Indeed, in ignoring class altogether, we risk formulating romanticised – and, at their heart, inaccurate – representations of women artists. Hana Leaper writes that in working so defiantly against gendered social and artistic covenants, women artists were challenging their families and traditional femininity, and in this dedication to friendship, sexual openness and work, Leaper argues, they risked: ‘poverty, hunger, deprivation, lack of recognition and continued gender exclusion.’¹²⁷ In framing women as a homogenous group that experienced their identity and its oppressions in the same way, Leaper erases how women artists were differently positioned in terms of their class background, race, sexuality, and politics, all of which powerfully determined the production, preoccupations and reception of their work. Leaper describes Bell as a ‘busy mother, friend, sister, wife and lover, a rare achievement in the history of art,’ without mentioning the conditions in which such a full and multitudinous life was possible; namely, the addition of domestic help – she always had at least three servants, even during the war when Charleston was without basic amenities – and the stable, comfortable financial situation she enjoyed throughout her life, partly through marriage to Clive Bell, heir to a large coal fortune.¹²⁸ Despite Leaper’s claims, Bell never risked anything resembling ‘hunger’ or ‘poverty,’ and my study will complicate this heroic narrative of female artistic personhood. These women were all white, and with the exception of Gluck (who was Jewish), were all raised in ambiently Christian households, instilling in them a form of complacency which engendered casual racism – discernible in depressing public statements as well as private reflections – and in the case of the Bloomsbury Group, made space for anti-Semitism. While Bell and her circle were beginning to question the violence meted out by the British Empire, the brutal inequities of colonial power, their everyday behaviour often did not sustain these beliefs. In other words, these women’s work was complexly intertwined with their

¹²⁶ Allison Pease, *Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11.

¹²⁷ Hana Leaper, “‘Immortal Apples and Eternal Eggs’: Life and Still Life in the Bedsits of Bloomsbury’ in *Living with Strangers: Bedsits and Boarding Houses in Modern English Life, Literature and Film* ed. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 27.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

experiences of marginalisation and privilege alike.

However, while researching this thesis in various archives, certain other women artists came to light, those which possessed even less of a profile than those at the centre of my study. These women were ambivalently positioned in terms of their class or cultural capital, meaning they could not access the networks that would have encouraged their practice and could have made their work more commercially viable; or they had little interest in exhibition or sale; or they made drastic mistakes choosing a partner; or they suffered more keenly the grip that misogynistic ideology had over everything from the art world to the medical institution. Winifred Gill, Edna Waugh, Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd and Helen Coombe were all to varying extents unable to make new and radical lives out of the given norms: committed to their art practice with little external praise or success, they are almost always omitted from accounts of modernism. The fleeting presence of these women, shadowy counterparts to my subjects, could only ever be a partial antidote to their erasure from history. Their experiences should not, however, be forgotten. Their chorus of warnings, which constitute brief interludes – ‘the spaces between’ chapters as is alluded to in my project’s title – belong here as much as the stories of success.

The Spaces and Speed of Modernism

For all their achievements, works of feminist scholarship have had the unintentional effect of further perpetuating a sense that modernist aesthetic discourse was determined by experiences of speed in the urban centre. Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry’s essay on four British women artists linked to Vorticism and its magazine *Blast* is unusual in focusing upon avant-gardes in England, but shares with other historians of women and modernism a focus upon the exclusion of women from the experience of urban space, detailing the strategies through which women

adapted or appropriated masculine coded identities such as the flâneur.¹²⁹ Anne Friedberg explores the experiences of flânerie women accessed through the new sites of sociability and consumerism embodied by the department store, and while Friedberg looks at Paris, Rachel Bowlby investigates an equivalent phenomenon in London.¹³⁰¹³¹ Elizabeth Wilson points to the instability of masculine and feminine identities, and women's access to the streets through sex work, as further justifications for the existence of a flâneuse.¹³² Lauren Elkins' hugely popular memoir-cum-cultural history, *Flâneuse* (2016), illustrates the wide reach of this rehistoricising of women in the city. These studies state that resistance, artistic productivity and modern modes of femininity were, in fact, generated in and through urban centres for a variety of bodies, providing one looks beyond the arcades and cafes prioritised by the male avant-garde. Although the gendered experience of modernism shifts away from male subjects, these studies are otherwise conventional in their findings, locating the practices and ideas of the avant-garde specifically within 'the conditions and relationships of the twentieth-century metropolis.'¹³³

Ultimately, the critical recuperation of flânerie has inadvertently served to further minimise the relation between modernism and the interior, situating all meaningful subjective experience and artistic transgression firmly outdoors. This reluctance to situate modernism within private space has its roots in avant-garde dogma, which 'positioned itself', as Christopher Reed reminds us, 'in opposition to the home.'¹³⁴ Reed's fascinating and thorough study of domestic interiors and modernism, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, argues that the room could provide a pretext and opportunity for remaking the self and aspects of the social.¹³⁵ Morag Shiach, in a

¹²⁹ Beckett, Jane and Cherry, Deborah, 'Modern women, modern spaces: women, metropolitan culture and Vorticism,' in *Women Artists and Modernism* ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 36-54.

¹³⁰ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1994)

¹³¹ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*. London: Routledge, 2009.

¹³² Elizabeth Wilson, *The sphinx in the city: urban life, the control of disorder, and women* (Oakland, CA: The University of California Press, 1992)

¹³³ Raymond Williams, 'Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism', in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. by Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1996), 37.

¹³⁴ Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: modernism, subculture and domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 16.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

short article indebted to Reed, suggests that the domestic interior was significant not only as a metaphorical landscape of modernism, but as a literal space in which modernist creativity could flourish, citing the series of flats frequented by Ezra Pound and his network.¹³⁶ Victoria Rosner's important study of literary modernism and domestic architecture asserts that while space has long been central to 'debates about the nature of literary modernism', 'most critics have not dealt with space in material terms – or examined its gendered aspects.'¹³⁷ Like many of its predecessors, this study specifically asserts the importance of the meaning-making that occurred within modernism's liminal spaces, highly charged sites that negotiated, transgressed and intermixed public and private spheres.¹³⁸

Alison Light explores at length how 'what had formerly been held as the virtues of the private sphere of middle class life take on a new public and national significance' in early twentieth century British society.¹³⁹ The establishment of the Women's Institutes (Wis) in 1915 and their subsequent popularisation in the decades that followed offered women a forum in which to discuss domestic subjects while learning about issues such as citizenship, suffrage and homemaking, blurring the lines between the personal and the political.¹⁴⁰ Although conservative in its adherence to separate sphere ideology, Light observes that 'the new commercial culture of homemaking [...] placed woman and the home, and a whole panoply of connected issues, at the centre of national life.'¹⁴¹ Light looks at women's middlebrow fiction in the interwar period, much of it concerned with decent middle-class women navigating the difficulties and pleasures of domestic life, and regards them as reflecting a modernity that was 'felt and lived in the most interior and private places.'¹⁴² Light frames this often overlooked, sentimental popular fiction as

¹³⁶ Morag Shiach, 'Modernism, the City and the Domestic Interior,' *Home Cultures*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2005), 253.

¹³⁷ Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 4.

¹³⁸ See, for instance: Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: the liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Elizabeth F. Evans, *Threshold Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

¹³⁹ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), 7.

¹⁴⁰ Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and citizens: Domesticity and the women's movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 22.

¹⁴¹ Light, *Forever England*, 7.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

generating and reflecting ‘an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward looking, more domestic and more private – and, in terms of pre-war standards, more feminine.’¹⁴³ These spaces, I suggest, not only index a turn towards the home as a site of political meaning-making, but – more importantly for the purposes of my study – offer unique insight into modernism’s turn towards interiority and subjectivity. In this thesis, visual representations of interiors are understood not only as figures of modern consciousness, but as witnesses to the physical landscapes in which gendered forms of modernist innovation, community and collaboration found space to develop, uninhibited by societal pressures: as psychic and literal spaces simultaneously. While *Light* looks at conservative heterosexual women and fiction, this thesis dwells with distinct but related artistic forms used by queer women, and focuses on the arsenal of possible alternatives to dyadic couplehood or conventional familial structure that were, for them, held within the domestic form.

Modernism has typically been understood as moving away from the domestic to the urban, and connectedly as a speeding up. Within this binary, urban space is terrain that one moves through, radically effecting perception, bodily sensation, affect, connecting the subject to other subjects, spaces and experiences. The home, by contrast, is characterised by experiences of slowness, in activities such as sleeping, resting, eating, reading, cooking and other forms of leisure. Modernity has been understood as a time of speed. In his essays from the early part of the century, Henri Bergson asserts the primacy of motion within his framework of subject-centred time: the expansive becoming of being-in-time, or *durée*, is forever moving.¹⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel, similarly, understood the urban environments as defined by ‘rapid change, frenzied activity, speed, distraction, fluidity, and, most important, a sense of being in perpetual, unstoppable motion.’¹⁴⁵ Consequently, accounts of modernist literature and art have long focused upon experiences of fluidity, transition and speed: for these studies, modernist

¹⁴³ Ibid, 8.

¹⁴⁴ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006)

¹⁴⁵ Louise Hornby *Still Modernism: Photography, Literature, Film* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.

work asks its readers and audience to consider the transgression of boundaries, the uncertainties of perception, the thrill of velocity in one's bones. In Claudia Tobin's impressive 2020 study of modernism and still life, what is focused on above all is the genre's dialectic of movement and stillness, a binary which she suggests still life sets itself up to trouble, opening the viewer out to 'a spectrum of more subtle and complex fluctuations'.¹⁴⁶ Enda Duffy's *The Speed Handbook* forms the context of Tobin's study, and addresses what he regards as the modernist fascination with speed: distilled into the experience of riding in a mass-produced automobile, it more broadly stems, he argues, from technological advances and the industrial revolution.¹⁴⁷ For it was not just the car that promised a greater efficiency and speed in life: 'the bicycle, the phonograph, the telephone, the airplane, the movie camera, even mass electrification and electric light,' all, Duffy argues, accelerated and thus radically revised the constituent parts of everyday experiences.¹⁴⁸ Duffy links speed, first of all, to commodity culture and the onset of late capitalism, and secondly (but no less importantly) to the foreshortening and condensing of space brought about by the expansion of the British Empire. In Duffy's assessment, 'commodification and imperialism alike work on a logics of distance.'¹⁴⁹

Working from a belief that velocity is tied to 'goods, people, money, power,' as Duffy has it, we might come to understand speed as operating in fields traditionally gendered masculine. The binary of speed/masculinity and slowness/femininity is a salient one, as Louise Hornby confirms in her study of stillness, stating that stillness has been caught up in a 'long representational history that casts stasis in negative and often feminized terms.'¹⁵⁰ Duffy argues that with the invention of the motorcar the human organism became 'valorised for its capacity for energy,' with well-being accordingly 'recast more vehemently as the capacity for active

¹⁴⁶ Tobin, *Modernism and Still Life*, 2.

¹⁴⁷ Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 18.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 19.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁵⁰ Hornby, *Still Modernism*, 17.

movement.¹⁵¹ For women, however, as Allison Pease argues at length, the experience of boredom and languor were culturally and socially sanctioned, from the long sedentary afternoons in drawing rooms expected of healthy women to months in rest cure institutions prescribed for those even with the mildest complaints. This thesis looks to quiet effort and continuous presence, in women lingering over stoves or adjusting pillows in lounges: to experiences of reticence, hesitation, retreat, contemplation, and languor. For every instance in modernist literature in which a man is striding across a square or racing through town in a motorcar, there is a woman like Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway, 'hesitating one moment on the threshold of the drawing room,' napping in her bedroom, stalling before a shop window to catch her reflection, steeping herself in reveries in parks and at parties.¹⁵² If, as Duffy argues, we have understood speed – and connected ideas of distance, or its collapsing – as a gendered experience tied to a particular politics and society, then this study turns his proposition on its head, asking what affects and values are borne out of an experience of stillness. Relatedly, while Duffy contemplates an 'adrenaline aesthetic,' this study will consider what aesthetics, practices, and compositions could be thought of as defining a still, calm, and considered visuality.¹⁵³ Stillness, therefore, will be considered as a quality both artistic and affective, painterly and political.

A reparative, queer and creative method

If the still life of John, Bell, Sands and Gluck has been regarded, as I have argued, as insufficiently feminist, queer or radical, politically or aesthetically, how might we approach the work in a way that does not foreground its failures? To enter their work anew, and to provide an original contribution to research on women artists, this thesis proposes a hybrid methodology. In what follows I suggest a meeting of methodological strands from across the humanities: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of 'reparative reading' is used alongside elements of queer

¹⁵¹ Duffy, *The Speed Handbook*, 22.

¹⁵² Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Granada Publishing, 1976), 58.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 3.

historiography and communicated through the techniques and styles associated with creative writing, newly acknowledged amongst writers of academic art history as a legitimate method for critical study.

In her playfully titled essay, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,' Sedgwick describes how certain reading practices, the Marxist and psychoanalytic traditions Paul Ricoeur calls the 'schools of suspicion,' locate all epistemological authority in the work of exposure, rendering all analysis a process of discovering violence one already knows exists.¹⁵⁴ Sedgwick's essay dares to question the academic norms that have – as she freely admits – shaped her most respected work, and are so prevalent as to be practically synonymous with criticism itself. Sedgwick identifies the features of 'paranoid reading' as establishing and maintaining critical distance, resisting any element of surprise (having come to the text with assumptions that only demand evidence) and suppressing personal preference, indeed disavowing all affective experience in order to claim ownership over truth.¹⁵⁵ Although Sedgwick's call to move away from – or at least nuance, or adapt – symptomatic reading and ideology critique applies to literary critical studies, and was borne out of a theoretical exhaustion particular to that field, I would like to bring Sedgwick's theory to bear on art historical criticism, a field in which reading and looking practices are equally pathological. Through the exercise of these practiced methods and techniques texts (and artworks) are repeatedly made to reveal an adherence to dominant power structures such as heterosexuality, binary gender, and conventional domesticity – but, Sedgwick wonders, to what end? Very little would change in our understanding of an artwork or its context if we merely stated that still life painted by women in the early twentieth century reflected their frustrated educational opportunities, their confinement within the home, and a shared impulse to practice and project an idealised femininity. As a critical stance it is certainly 'doable and teachable,' Sedgwick

¹⁵⁴ Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,' in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

concedes, but the paranoid impulse towards exposure seems redundant, she argues, in a society where state violence is already on the surface, and met not with outrage but with apathy.¹⁵⁶ As Sedgwick poses, ‘what is the basis for assuming that it will surprise or disturb, never mind motivate, anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, self-contradictory, imitative, phantasmatic, or even violent?’¹⁵⁷ She concludes that although many of the exposés, demystifications, and bearings of witness performed by critique are true and convincing, they function merely as a restatement of various known sources of oppression. The problem is less this lack of efficacy than critique’s inability, she writes, to recognise its own limits, flaws or embedded assumptions, its lack of self-reflexivity. Paranoid reading remains an important tool in a critic’s arsenal, but its dominance has rendered all acts of interpretation grimly deterministic. In any ‘ecology of knowing’, Sedgwick writes, there must be ‘weak as well as strong theoretical acts.’¹⁵⁸ In opposition to the ‘dogged, defensive narrative stiffness of a paranoid temporality,’ reparative reading is operated by ‘the heartbeat of contingency,’ and is ‘oriented towards surprise.’¹⁵⁹ If in paranoid or suspicious reading critical attachments are forged by correction, rejection and anger, then Sedgwick explains this new form of reading and writing as centred around positive affects. ‘Reparative motives,’ Sedgwick writes, ‘once they become explicit, are inadmissible in paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure (“merely aesthetic”) and because they are frankly ameliorative (“merely reformist”).’¹⁶⁰ After all, Sedgwick argues, ‘what makes pleasure and amelioration so “mere”?’¹⁶¹ Dwelling over the richness of identification and attachment, Sedgwick imagines responding to and theorising with a text through affection, hope, gratitude, solidarity, and love.¹⁶² Practically this reconfiguration of exegesis means an examination of a small sample of specifically positioned women artists rather than a vast archiving of texts

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 143.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 141.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 145.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 144.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

and works, examining them through what Brian Glavey names Sedgwick's 'imaginative close-reading'.¹⁶³ The short sections in between chapters addressed to obscure women artists are attempts to further realise the weak theory imagined by Sedgwick. Led by description rather than analysis, small details and acts of noticing rather than reading in depth, and without any strong theoretical argument justifying their presence, these texts are 'punctums or punctures', as Kathleen Stewart frames her own writing shaped by weak theoretical acts, collections of historical and affective singularities which do not follow the focused argumentation favoured by traditional academic thought.¹⁶⁴

These developments in queer theory and literary studies are consistent with the rise of methodological experiments in art history and theory. As a discipline, art history is increasingly interested in the self-reflexivity offered by creative-critical approaches. In Amelia Jones's study of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Irrational Modernism* (2004), the 'seemingly "objective" passages of art historical argument' are offset with 'intermittent bursts of neurasthenic irrationality (admissions of my own overidentification, etc)'.¹⁶⁵ What is contained within the 'etc' of Jones's method encompasses a variety of strategies intended 'to expose the way in which all historical narrative takes shape through an intertwining among subjects' in the service of 'challenging the very rationalism of art history itself'.¹⁶⁶ With similarly radical intentions, Jane Rendell's *Site Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* 'aim(s) to put the sites of engagement with art first' through case studies addressed to her encounters with art:

'these include the sites – material, emotional, political and conceptual – of the artwork's construction, exhibition and documentation, as well as those remembered, dreamed and imagined by the artist, critic and other viewers.'¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Brian Glavey, *The Wallflower Avant-Garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.

¹⁶⁴ Kathleen Stewart, 'Weak Theory in an Unfinished World', *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 45, No. 1, (2008), 71.

¹⁶⁵ Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism*, 24.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 1.

For Rendell, the boundary between subject and object of criticism becomes more porous through this method, and ‘arguments are made not only directly, but indirectly, through association and implication’.¹⁶⁸ Like Jones, Rendell is interested in disrupting the practiced critical distance of art historical criticism, ‘asking what it is possible for a critic to say about an artist, a work, the site of a work and the critic herself and for the writing to still “count” as criticism.’¹⁶⁹ Within this creative framework, theory itself acquires a new significance. ‘It becomes all too easy to impose closure in the space of play,’ Adrian Rifkin writes, ‘or intensive argument with others’ uses of theoretical paradigms rather than setting them to work for the purpose of invention’¹⁷⁰

Jones, Rendell and Rifkin are not alone in rethinking the terms of art historical scholarship,¹⁷¹ and the fact that their work constitutes its own creative practice, constituting ‘another quite autonomous discourse’ furthering the ambitions and intellectual possibilities of the discipline has not gone unnoticed by scholars in the field, Satish Padiyar amongst them.¹⁷² Michael Hatt and Mark Ledbury open their study of the intersections of fiction and art history (which includes studies of speculative methodologies) with a stated commitment to ‘the complexity of the entanglements and the excitement of the encounter.’¹⁷³ The volume *Creative Writing and Art History* (2011) edited by Catherine Grant and Patricia Rubin emerged from a special issue of the journal ‘Art History’ on the topic. Grant loosely defines the creative work enclosed as ‘self-conscious of its own process, foregrounding form as much as content’, and which proposes ‘an interrogation of the art historian’s voice’ alongside ‘the act of writing and interpretation’.¹⁷⁴ ‘The emphasis on desire, on feeling, on the irrational and intuitive,’ Grant

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 2.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Adrian Rifkin, *Ingres: Then, and Now* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5.

¹⁷¹ For other examples of art historical writing with a focus on subjectivity and experiment, see: T. J. Clark, *In the Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Carol Mavor, *Aurelia: Art and Literature Through the Mouth of the Fairy Tale* (London: Reaktion, 2017), *Blue Mythologies: Reflections on a Colour* (London: Reaktion, 2013) *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jete, Sans Soleil, and Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Adrian Rifkin, *Ingres: Then and Now* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁷² Satish Padiyar, ‘Notes on Writing as Vertigo’ *Art History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 2011), 412.

¹⁷³ Michael Hatt and Mark Ledbury, *Fictions of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), v.ii.

¹⁷⁴ Catherine Grant, ‘A narrative of what wishes what it wishes it to be’: An Introduction to ‘Creative Writing and Art History,’ *Art history*, Vol. 34, No. 2, (April 2011), 230.

explains, ‘is often put aside as an art historical text is written,’ and it is this decisive erasure of emotion which creative-critical approaches seek to redress. Yet this profoundly subjective, affective way of looking and writing is not without its own rigour or a broader political usefulness. Grant insists that the self-consciousness creative work can uniquely touch upon ‘the decisions, distractions and detours that lead to one narrative dominating another,’ exposing how the art historical canon has been formed.¹⁷⁵ Grant’s remark about historical narrative, or the mechanisms through which one version of aesthetics or experience comes to prevail in our sense of a period, equally applies to biography, which this thesis additionally folds into analysis. Janet Malcom’s *The Silent Woman*, a study of the ethics of biographical writing and research, and which powerfully argues for the genre’s trade in mythologies rather than truth, has informed the way this thesis uses biographical material.¹⁷⁶ Rather than create reductive hagiographical accounts of women’s lives, or reveal sensational details, Malcolm’s work encourages us to meditate on our investment in researching and writing a life. Malcolm’s ambivalent account of Plath’s afterlife acknowledges that biographical narrative can neither be objective, nor truly approximate a life’s authentic texture and experience, and is always a belatedly constructed fiction, a tissue of voices and details drawn from accounts given by the subject, their family and friends, and in the case of Plath – and other cultural figures – the thoughts and feelings of their readers and future scholars.

My thesis is positioned amongst these richly innovative, creative examples, and employs a form of critical writing that is reparative and affective, queerly close to its object, inventive and flirtatious, eager ‘to poeticize our professional discourse’ as Padiyar puts it, and interested in the sites in which encounters with art are experienced. Theoretical frameworks drawn from queer, feminist and psychoanalytic traditions are accordingly subsumed within this playful, expansive methodology and, inspired by Rifkin, I use them ‘to do bricolage rather than to refer to an anterior truth’.¹⁷⁷ In bringing these approaches together, each chapter of this thesis employs what

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (London: Vintage, 1995).

¹⁷⁷ Rifkin, *Ingres: Then and Now*, 6.

might be considered more traditional art historical writing – identifying contexts, close reading artworks with firm connections between intention and interpretation – alongside sections invested in more creative approaches, in the process blurring the boundaries between the established discourse and these performative, affective gestures.

Partly this choice of methodology was ideological, motivated by the feminist and queer potential of writing aslant to academic norms which Grant, Padiyar and others are eager to stress; however, it is also rooted in the first encounters I had with these artists' practices while working in the archive at The Charleston Trust. Tasked with sorting through an enormous collection of previously unseen ephemera, notebooks and sketchbooks belonging to Vanessa Bell, traces of process rose to the surface, as did flashes of a private address. In drawings ranging from the seriousness of preparatory sketches to the casualness of doodles, Bell could be witnessed working through ideas and images that would later resurface in her paintings. Fruit scribbled in haste on a sheet of flimsy notebook paper moved through a number of iterations before finding permanent, public life on canvas. Yet it was oblique evidence of Bell's everyday thinking and feeling, what was telegraphed in pages crowded with sketches of everyday objects and domestic marginalia, the unexpected richness of throwaway material forgotten about for decades, which held my interest. The movement from shopping lists illustrated with doodles of its contents to still life paintings was intuitive, an exchange of the verbal for the visual. Yet the connection was deeper, and more formally and affectively striking even than that. Still life suggested itself to me as a subject because its minor status, its smallness of focus, its vivid connection to everyday domestic life, and its myriad subtexts, closely corresponded with the aesthetics and affects of Bell's archival ephemera. Where Rendell favours the gallery for its engagement with ideas about architecture and embodiment, these experiences at The Charleston Trust led me to privilege the archive as a space of desire, sensation, surprise and intimacy: The National Library of Wales in Chapter 2; The Charleston Trust in Chapter 3; the Gluck Archive in Chapter 4, and the Tate Archive in Chapter 5; the interludes between chapters envelop

experiences at The Bodleian Archive at The University of Oxford, The Kings College Cambridge Archive at The University of Cambridge and the Tate Archive.

Chapter 1 examines John's interiors, foregrounding her engagement with the word's double valence: the interior as a figure of subjectivity as well as a lived space representative and generative of a new freedom for women living and working in metropolitan centres. Chapter 2 argues for the role of Bell's still life in representing and contesting the ideologies of motherhood. It insists that Bell arrived at figurative still life, and a modest late style that has gone entirely unexamined, only after testing out abstraction as a possible means of representing maternal embodiment. Chapter 3 shows how Gluck's gender ambivalence manifested itself in an early career that was defiantly resistant to still life, and goes on to explore the queer collaboration between Gluck and society florist Constance Spry, treating Spry's work as a radical art practice in its own right which subsequently fed into the most celebrated works of Gluck's career. Aside from Gwen John, none of the women in this thesis have received sustained critical attention, eliciting the occasional monograph or article in the decades since their death. However, Chapter 4 is the first ever critical study of Ethel Sands, and explores her queering of interior scenes through motifs of illusion, misdirection, and disguise. In the *spaces between* chapters, encounters with women artists in the archive emerge: I discuss Winifred Gill's note-making practices, Edna Waugh's evocative sketches and passionate literary adaptations, the difficulties in excavating the work of Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd, and the unknown literary ambitions of artist Helen Coombe.

Chapter 1: Gwen John's Interior Scenes

Diana Fuss notes that 'interiority' acquired its present meaning of 'inner character or nature' in 1803, while 'interior decoration' first appeared in English only four years later, coined by Thomas Hope in 1807.¹ This double resonance – interiors of the mind and home – will be my point of departure, along with the work of Virginia Woolf, who consistently wrote out of and from the term's rich metaphoricity in the century that followed. 'I like going from one lighted room to another,' Woolf wrote in her diary in 1924, 'such is my brain to me; lighted rooms.'² Woolf's metaphor has the mind as a coherent, harmonious and familiar structure she is able to move through with ease, a frictionless, capacious space conveniently lit and plotted out in which great expanses of time can be fruitfully spent. The image is an idyllic conceit in which one's mind entails little self-alienation, angst or repression. For Woolf, the room is a useful tool for visualising abstract concepts, and with an optimistic (even utopian) tint: a dream of thought, fantasy, and fierce contemplation freely accommodated. It is also true that for Woolf and her peers evoking rooms was to conjure a concrete material space in which their identities were newly accommodated. In her celebrated 1927 tract *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf made clear that these same rooms meant differently according to your gender. For women, rooms were part of homes that had, as Amanda Vickery states, transformed between 1500 and 1800 'from an economic institution that suppressed the individual, to an introspective emotional unit built around children.'³ In emphasising affective connection, Vickery suggests something of the freedom these changed relationships between self and space potentially offered, but would not realise for another couple of centuries. Indeed, in placing emphasis on emotion correctly learnt,

¹ Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Rooms and the Writers that Shaped Them* (London: Routledge, 2004), 9.

² Virginia Woolf and Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 2: 1920-24* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 128.

³ Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 26.

administered and circulated, the affirmation of family and motherhood within the home warranted a rigid domestic ideology that demanded women renounce their creative and intellectual ambitions, serving merely as – to use the poet Coventry Patmore’s infamous formulation – an ‘Angel in the House’: unalive, virtuous, confined. Yet, fortunately, further change lay in wait. In the first decades of the century, women confronted the seismic shifts in terms of desire, emotion and creativity brought about by the room being disarticulated from the home, as single domicile renting became available to young women in metropolitan centres. In this chapter, I will argue that Gwen John’s representations of her room were as much studies of the self as they were material records of living conditions that were specific to a new generation of young women who were renting bedsits, and finding in them greater imaginative and sexual freedom. The room became, I will argue, a generative site for John’s aesthetic practices and artistic networks: it was a place to meet other women artists, to collaborate, to model, and to make art governed by different values to the dominant avant-garde. Although Woolf touches upon the role played by class in occupying rooms, insisting that women must have a certain salary in order to garner any independence, I will argue that John provides a richer and more thorough account of how economic realities shaped women’s experience of these provisional, make-shift, solo domesticities. I then argue that John’s interested, attentive, contented female subjectivity is significant in lending representation to those who existed outside the modernist masculine paradigm of the flâneur, but is also unusual when seen alongside modernism’s slew of distracted, bored, or unhappy women, all of whom are deprived of access to ‘agency, interest and meaning,’ as Alison Pease summarises.⁴ I conclude by considering how the subjectivity constructed and embodied by John’s archival material subtly contests that which is represented by her rooms.

⁴ Alison Pease, *Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

The Rented Room and Modernist Culture

Gwen John was born in Haverfordwest, Wales in 1876. After a childhood in which, as she later recalled, she ‘cried all the time,’ she enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Art in 1895.⁵ In a origin myth commonplace in discussing the lives of women artists at the turn of the century, John resisted the narrative arc guaranteed by conventional domesticity: maturing, marrying, moving out and into another home, headed merely by a different patriarch. Instead, she replaced a multi-storey, cavernous seaside house in Tenby with a series of sparsely furnished rooms in London’s district of Bloomsbury. The miserable restrictions of her Victorian upbringing were opening out onto a new century and its alternative orders for living, to possibilities both artistic and emotional. The Slade was the first art school in the UK to allow gender integrated life classes, enabling women to draw from the nude rather than draped models; as a consequence, it became popular amongst women, who constituted two-thirds of its student population.⁶ John entered this lively homosocial world, forging friendships that would go on to shape the rest of her intimate life. After sharing rooms in a boarding house with her brother, the artist Augustus John, John briefly took a basement room alone on Howland Street. John would go on to settle permanently in Paris in 1904, and while her female peers would marry and settle in houses, John continued moving alone through a succession of rented rooms. Although John was not the only woman taking advantage of this transformation to women’s living spaces, she was amongst the first wave of women able to do so.

Francesca Berry writes that while single room dwellings had long been a feature of urban domesticity, ‘the perceived housing shortage, as well as more holistic foregrounding of the home in public discourse [...] meant that it became much more of a motif in modernist culture.’⁷ Ann

⁵ Sue Roe, *Gwen John: A Life* (London: Vintage, 2002), 6.

⁶ Delia Gaze, Maja Mihajlovic, and Leanda Shrimpton, *Dictionary of Women Artists* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), 84.

⁷ Francesca Berry, ‘Housewife Writ Large: Marie Mécannique, Paulette Bernège, and New Feminist Domesticity in Interwar France’, *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 1, (2017), 9.

Heilmann contextualises Berry's point for the British (rather than French) room, and suggests a gendered dimension, arguing that the early twentieth century was the first time in the nation's history that large numbers of middle class women were able to leave their parental homes to study or earn a living, looking for meaningful work and independent accommodation.⁸ Although single occupancy dwellings were used by men too – bachelors, queer men, and retired army officers, especially – by the 1930s there were twice as many women renting these spaces as men.⁹ Further, living outside the family unit had long been an option to men, and one that if chosen would be met with approval, or in the case of men on the margins, simply indifference, responses rarely afforded to women in a similar position, who were regarded as shirking their biological and social destiny. Single occupancy dwellings differed subtly but significantly from one another, and some were regarded as even less suitable for women. In boarding houses, Terri Mulholland explains, which tended to be advertised to and occupied by women, there was communal dining and entertainment, laundry and cleaning: with a closer relationship to the traditional familial home in its structure and rituals, it entailed a stricter moral code.¹⁰ Bedsits, by comparison, were often austere, cramped, and squalid, but had the advantage of operating under less supervision and moral restraint. Hotel rooms, similarly, bore little relationship to the traditional structure of the home, but had communal spaces the bedsit lacked, such as the lounge and the lobby. Judging from John's accounts of her rooms, which rarely identify exactly what kind of accommodation she had taken but contain suggestive details regarding their condition, other occupants and rent, she moved between bedsits and hotel rooms, uninterested in the simulacrum of familial sociality offered up by the boarding house.

⁸ Ann Heilmann, 'Feminist Resistance, the Artist and "A Room of One's Own" in New Woman Fiction', *Women's Writing: The Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, Vol.2, No.3, (1995), 294.

⁹ See: Mark Armstrong, 'A Room in Chelsea: Quentin Crisp at Home'. *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2011), 155-69.

¹⁰ Terri Mullholland, *British Boarding Houses in Interwar Women's Literature: Alternative Domestic Spaces*. (London: Routledge, 2016) 18.

Given the inevitable disapproval they faced, why did women flock to rented rooms? For some, single occupancy rooms were simply a necessity borne out of a drastic move away from their established community to a new urban environment, pursuing education or new employment opportunities. For others, however, the appeal, whether consciously or not, was more ideological in nature. Demands for equal voting rights, fiscal power, and education had moved white middle class women closer towards powerful hegemonies, but the realities of women's lives at this time was such that many were still directed to the home as their greatest source of fulfilment. Women's attachment to the home was given new meaning and salience through representations across high and low culture: in fiction and poetry, domestic manuals and conduct books, newspapers, sermons and political speeches the enduring value of traditional gender roles were debated and defined, newly connected to ideas about nationalism, race and class.¹¹ As a woman, to build a home was suddenly also to buttress ideas about Britishness, to create a microcosm of the nation and its values, and it was to take responsibility over the formulation of contemporary morals and national rhetoric within spaces that were shaping public discourse more than ever. These Victorian and Edwardian domestic ideologies of home and womanliness, which rarely exactly captured the lived realities of domesticity, could be summarised by one of their earliest proponents, John Ruskin, for whom the home was a place 'of peace and not strife, rest and not labour, confidence and not anxiety, unity and not division.'¹² What the binaries Ruskin sets up point to is the broader logic of separate spheres that shaped certain experiences of the home: the feminine realm of emotion was rooted in the drawing room, the bedroom, and the nursery, while the masculine realm was outside of the home, a place of public life and work.¹³ Yet middle class women wielded authority within the home only in as far

¹¹ See Alison Light, *Forever England: femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991). Light considers the fiction of Ivy Compton Burnett, Agatha Christie, Jan Struther and Daphne du Maurier as examples of these domestic ideologies powerfully impacting upon gendered culture.

¹² Monica Feinberg Cohen, *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

¹³ It has been pointed out by many recent critics how inexact the model of separate spheres is, especially for those who were not white and middle class during this historical period. Working class women and women of colour did not have the luxury of being confined to the home: they worked, often in white middle class women's homes. See:

as they would conform to certain expectations: they must be self-sacrificial, endlessly resourceful and skilled in their management of the household, and lacking in intellectual or creative aspirations that turned their attention away from their duties. Woolf's famous railing against domestic ideology in *A Room of One's Own* argued that women were unable to flourish creatively for this very reason: not only were traditional institutions unavailable to women, but they must also overcome the internalisation of a domestic ideal that would always present their individual creative desires and ambitions as secondary to the work of the home.¹⁴

Renting rooms represented a radical alternative to the angst and sense of impasse experienced by many women in relation to conventional domesticity. Rented rooms had no coercive discourse attached to their inhabitancy: in foreclosing certain rituals central to the feminine domestic ideal, they managed to exist relatively outside of the home's gendered ideologies. Meals were eaten out, or provided by a landlady, meaning the kitchen was no longer a loaded space in which a servile iteration of women's role was daily practised and performed. Possessions were kept to a minimum, so forms of middle class accumulation and display – those which were advertised by marriage, and embodied in rooms stuffed full of expensive furniture – were precluded. They were single occupancy, with male visitors (and romantic relationships) forbidden, freeing up their time and energy and suggesting an alternative emotional purpose to their lives. The Victorian household was large enough to be strictly compartmentalised so as to prevent intergenerational and cross-class contact. Rented rooms, however, condensed a variety of subjects into a single space, and thus challenged the assumed naturalness of the family understood as a small group of direct blood relations in clear hierarchical relation to one another.

No More Separate Spheres!: A Next Wave American Studies Reader ed. by Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ These somewhat categorical narratives of women's oppression in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are useful not least because they fit within an arc of 'progress, loss and return' which has proven important, as Clare Hemmings argues (in *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*) in conceptualising the feminist project. Hemmings's work situates itself against these implied narratives of liberation, while Elizabeth Langland and Feinberg Cohen specifically question the absoluteness with which Victorian women have been cast as passive, dependent victims. These historians – whose arguments inform my own – insist that women had more significant and extensive economic and political function than is usually perceived, and used the discourse of domesticity to their own ends as a means of consolidating middle class control.

Shared accommodation was therefore antagonistic to domesticity's most fundamental norms, triggering anxieties within Victorian society about 'disease, promiscuity, poverty and its attendant vices, and of haunting, ghosts and revenants.'¹⁵ In the early twentieth century, those fears acquired a more singular focus regarding women's morality and respectability. Mulholland explains that concerns were 'voiced about the social acceptability of women living alone' due to 'fears of the potential immorality that would erupt if women were to recreate the unsupervised, anonymous lives of the bachelor male.'¹⁶ What would happen, in other words, to women's sexual lives in spaces unpoliced by their families in which the bed provided a constant suggestive backdrop? The modes of attachment and intimacy permitted by the home were known, centred around the institution of marriage, whereas the rented room at once implied and enabled short-term relationships, or – perhaps even more radically – the lack of a primary romantic relationship altogether.

What frightened middle class subjects who overidentified with domestic ideology would strike others as freeing. Across modernist cultures the bedsit and rented room would become, as Chiari Briganti and Kathy Mezei illustrate, symbolic of the severance of familial ties and an end to the nightmare of forced domestic life.¹⁷ For modernist women writers like Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, the room marked both the discovery of urban space and the wish for solitude. It was both an assertive escape, a refusal, a withdrawal from human relationships, and a means of becoming networked, engaged in a new system of sociality outside of the family.¹⁸ The room therefore enabled and modelled a new sort of identity for women, one engaged within the broader workings of society and culture, unfettered from the needs and demands of others, their family (present or potential) in particular. The morality, respectability

¹⁵ Chiari Briganti and Kathy Mezei, 'Introduction' in *Living with Strangers Bedsits and Boarding Houses in Modern English Life, Literature and Film*, ed. by Chiari Briganti and Kathy Mezei (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 4.

¹⁶ Mulholland, *British Boarding House Literature*, 23.

¹⁷ Briganti and Mezei, 'Introduction' in *Living with Strangers*, 25-43.

¹⁸ Dorothy Richardson's thirteen volume novel sequence *Pilgrimage (1915-1967)* is set across a series of temporary lodgings in London.

and control embodied by the home were replaced by a set of anti-domestic values, and chief amongst them was the notion of independence: of mind, body and property. The room was a promise of leisure and respite, and it was a commitment to women's creative ambitions and sexual desires; the restlessness and expansiveness of women's being in the world at the turn of the century could all be enclosed within its four walls.

By 1898, John was sure her first flight from her family home into rented rooms was a permanent choice, and only sought to expand that distance, to render the move more radical and absolute, arriving in Paris in search of a room following a trip to Rome with the artist Dorelia McNeil. John's depictions of her interiors there speak to the pleasures of a spatial independence that was profoundly psychological in its effects, and lends the broadly defined freedom of the room a visual form. Closer in their form, content and atmosphere to the domestic genre scenes of Johannes Vermeer (1632-1635), these paintings combine still life details with human figures, revising the Dutch genre scene according to a contemporary Parisian setting, and evoke a world of seclusion and harmony. *La Chambre sur la Cour* was painted between 1907 and 1908, and takes as its setting 7 rue St Placide, one of the first rooms John took in Paris. This is the first of a series of self-portraits in interiors John would complete between 1908 and 1912, works that together persuasively align the interiority of the sitter with her surroundings. Here John sits sewing by an open window, undisturbed, her cat curled on a wicker chair upholstered in a dazzling orange: she is alone but not without company, attentive but relaxed. A set of lace curtains are overlaid by a length of turquoise material that makes reference to the sky the windows open out to, but do not reveal, a visual effect which frames the room as an exhaustive environment onto itself. The French title refers to the position of the room overlooking a courtyard, and this features figures prominently in the composition itself. For the view from the window is a representation of the courtyard's defining structural feature, its creation of space between a set of enclosed walls. This architectural detail only corroborates the room's sense of self-sufficiency: beyond is not the urban environment, a glimpse of the teeming world the room

provides solace from, but another room. The painting registers no desire to renounce such an ordered, meticulously put together space: there is a harmoniousness to the composition created by the echoing shapes – the window reveals another window beyond, John's dress matches the distant curtain – and the décor's intricately interrelated patterns and refined palette. The pleasures of the situation, its stability and comfort outside the traditional home, are palpable.



Figure 2: Gwen John, *La Chambre sur la cour*, c.1907–8, Yale Center for British Art

However, the room was also a transitional, liminal space inhabited by subjects on the margins of society, offering little stability or privacy at the level enjoyed in a traditional home. Which is to say that the room could be freeing, but it could also be a site of imprisonment and claustrophobia, and it sometimes could be both simultaneously. The room in the hotel or boarding house constituted, as a number of critics point out, a liminal space between the public life of the city and the private sphere of the home.¹⁹ Porters, hotel staff, landladies, and other guests in adjoining rooms all threatened to intrude, to eavesdrop, or to otherwise impress themselves upon their tenants. The room itself rarely came with its own lock, and the shared

¹⁹Mezei and Briganti, *Living with Strangers*, 5.

corridors, bathrooms and stairways offered forms of traffic and encounter that rendered it closer at times to a public thoroughfare, and this lack of privacy could prove uncomfortable, even threatening, especially for lone women. By forfeiting membership to middle class femininity through refusing their duty to the home, women also ceased to be considered worthy of protection, compassion or help: to no longer be an 'Angel' was to accept a life as a vulnerable, mortal woman. In her correspondence, John writes of waking in the night to discover a burglar in her room, of hearing unsettling sounds through the walls, and of having money stolen by a hotel cleaner from amongst her belongings.²⁰ Of the little privacy lodgers possessed, there was no guarantee on how long it might last: the bedroom could be taken away at a moment's notice, a threat underlined by the changing cast of neighbouring tenants. John suffered a sudden eviction on at least one occasion, prompting a frantic search for a new room that significantly disrupted her modelling and painting.²¹ The material culture of rooms often underlined their history of precarious ownership: rooms were either sparse and unfurnished, or populated by a miscellanea of objects left by previous tenants. As Briganti and Mezei put it, 'like the lodgers themselves (objects) are there because they have nowhere else to go.'²² The anxieties implicit within the room were potentially grave: who or what you might find within your most private space was never exactly known. It was this uncertainty, in addition to the potential loneliness, discomfort, and poverty which posed threats, in particular, to older women. For women on the margins, unmarried but no longer young and therefore powerfully invisible, the room could easily become a manifestation of one's isolation and powerlessness, as it does for the protagonist of Katherine Mansfield's bleak short story 'Miss Brill', for whom the room is an empty, deathly space akin to a coffin.²³

²⁰ Roe, *Gwen John*, 72.

²¹ *Ibid*, 86.

²² Mezei and Briganti, *Living with Strangers*, 7.

²³ Katherine Mansfield, *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2007), 110.

Although John warned against ‘the poverty stricken appearance of everything in the house,’ the same letter reveals her savouring the acquisition of cheap furniture, relishing the room’s decoration and marshalling the help of friends, which together came to work against its pervasive anonymity.²⁴ Indeed, John’s letters only ever register her rooms as intensely personal spaces in which she invested a great deal of time, and through which she was able to access her most authentic sense of self. The rooms in John’s paintings are sparse, but not bare in a manner suggestive of dissatisfaction, loneliness or abjection: their bare boards and minimal soft furnishings are always radiant with light, cosy rather than claustrophobic, rendered in soft pastel colours. *La Chambre sur La Cour*, with its warm palette and sense of both enclosure and expansiveness, is typical. There are around a dozen paintings that place the viewer inside John’s room; many more that are not explicitly studies of an interior – the many portraits of women, for instance – take her room as a backdrop. Rooms are observed, cropped, refocused, and rearranged. Each room represents a slight but tangible reconstitution of another composition, a hand twisting a kaleidoscope. A sturdy table, the wicker chair delicate as fish bones, the parasol’s nose resting on the tiles, a shawl like a slice of night sky and all of it under a thin coating of buttery light; far closer now, china is placed under cloth, or flowers bloom in a tiny translucent glass on the table on the other side of the room. Anchored into a particular place, repeatedly guided towards the same surfaces and shapes from different angles, the stuff of life itself is pared back to a simple scaffold, and John studies the unexpected joints, the meeting of objects and hours on which so much depended, the parts of her own everyday structure which bore the most weight. The consistent tone of contentment, the abiding fascination with the room’s minutiae, and the obvious visual pleasure taken in simply dwelling with the same space together suggest a far more personal attachment than the bedsit is ordinarily believed to foster. John remains curious, grateful and moved by her room. John’s interior scenes therefore not only thematise the

²⁴ John, *Letters and Notebooks*, 33.

freedom of the rented room, but they also resolve some of the more challenging aspects of their inhabitancy.

Nina Hamnett was a painter roughly contemporary with John who lived in a series of bedsits around Bloomsbury and Paris. The similarities in their trajectories were pronounced: the pair had both lived in the Welsh town of Tenby as children – even sharing a dancing teacher – and would later live on the same street in Paris during the early 1900s. Hamnett, however, offers an alternative perspective on bedsit living through a still life strikingly different in style and tone to John's interior scenes. Hamnett utilises the anonymous, neglected objects that populate the ordinary bedsit, favouring a dark palette which replicates their surrounding squalor, rough brushstrokes approximating scuffed surfaces. In Hamnett's 1913, *Der Sturm*, for instance, a trio of three dimensional objects, a white jug, a cream cup and an ambiguous cylindrical structure, are grouped together in one corner of the painting, diagonally across from a pair of notebooks and the German literary magazine *Der Sturm*. Each object is presented in an intimate relation to another, their edges touching and overlapping, transposing the claustrophobia of the bedsit's human occupants onto its objects. The objects appear thrown together, displaced or dispossessed, set upon a surface which will only continue accumulating clutter; at once, the structure of the composition, its division of objects according to contrasting heights and depths, and the diagonal arrangement of those two groups, creates a sense of balance and symmetry. The objects might be understood as representing the different aspects of a lodger's life. The basic need for food and water is embodied in the crockery, while the creative life is represented by the reading and writing materials, and these preoccupations are shown in active, but ultimately successful, relation to one another. Indeed, the book itself may represent, as Susan Stewart argues of books, 'a talisman to the body and emblem to the self,' an interpretation that firmly situates Hamnett within the scene.²⁵ A full life, its loftier ambitions and deepest vocations as well

²⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 41.

as its immediate forms of sustenance are all enclosed within the work, just as the traces of Hamnett's lived experiences indelibly marked the objects that structured and filled her room. The presence of the journal *Der Sturm*, which was established in Berlin and covered a variety of avant-garde movements – Expressionism, Surrealism, Cubism and Dada – during its run between 1910 and 1932, marks the room out as a rich ground for radical thought and creative work. The journal states an allegiance with European aesthetics, and in doing so asserts the vast potential of this seemingly narrow, crowded space. This is not an experience of domesticity as an insular, static private culture, but imagines the room as a point of departure, a means of expanding one's horizons, a source of stimulation and imaginative flight. Awkwardly hemmed in, the scene nevertheless lacks unease or disquiet, any claustrophobic feeling counteracted by the general mood of spontaneity and aliveness. Hamnett's still life suggests an alternative domestic order detached from conventional femininity, and instead imagines a room organised around a readiness, comfort and ease enabling and productive to an art practice.



Figure 3: Nina Hamnett, *Der Sturm*, 1913, Private Collection.

Hamnett never painted the same object twice, and each of her bedsit interiors bears little resemblance to any previous work. In another still life from that period, a large, heavy set cooking pot is at its centre. Pared back to a harsh navy and bluish white against a bare backdrop, the pot has been washed of any association with family, and gapes imposingly in the centre of the picture, visualising hunger. Another still life shows a glass of white wine against a pearlescent surface: here Hamnett takes flight from the conventions of the genre, improvising with whatever space is available, suggesting the bar is no less welcoming and personal than her own room, and insinuating a life in which public and private realms are forever intermingled. In another pair of works, two different landladies, one from 1913 and one from 1918, are posed in surroundings adorned by distinct wallpapers and accompanied by their own unique anthropomorphic object. One woman has a lamp, the other a bowl of oranges: both objects – with their implications of light, richness, taste, pleasure and warmth – make a mockery of their environments, which are cold and fussy; the landladies, who gaze blankly ahead, are as lifeless as their surroundings. The worlds condensed by Hamnett’s diverse collection of still life are haphazardly made, designed to be dissembled without a trace, stressing the ontological impermanence of bedsit living and the lodger’s compromised agency and broadly deracinated status. Hamnett’s painting serves as an important reminder against over-eulogising the bedsit as a site of female creativity and autonomy. Bedsits were, for many women, a locus of economic hardship and social deprivation, a symbol of the monotonous drudgery of a working life they had once hopefully oriented themselves toward. Melissa Harvey agrees, arguing against the historical fixation with women’s rooms as one of ‘feminism’s easy platitudes.’²⁶ Harvey stresses the ‘class blind rubric’ of Woolf’s demand for a room – five hundred pounds a year, she reminds us, was a considerable sum –

²⁶ Melissa Harvey ‘Dwelling, Poaching, Dreaming: Housebreaking and Homemaking in Dorothy Richardson’s Pilgrimage,’ in *Inside Out: Women Negotiating, Appropriating, Subverting Public and Private Space*, ed by Teresa Gómez Reus and Aránzazu Usandizaga, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 168.

emphasising instead the room's association with downward mobility, punishing economic necessities, rootlessness, and anxieties surrounding respectability.

Keeping in mind the repressiveness of boarding house life, one might ask why John preserves her rooms as such straightforward sites of contentment. What meanings were being disseminated through her calm and idyllic images of spaces she experienced – one might assume – rather more ambivalently? Rather than thinking of John's approach to the room as a romantic fantasy of New Woman liberation blind to its realities, one might stress the importance of representing alternative domesticities in ways that question Victorian domestic ideology, and the sentimental, heterosexual idyll of the permanent, populous, many-roomed family house in particular. John's lone, non-reproductive, artistically motivated form of living radically went against the established structures of happiness that were in place for women of her class: to depict these spaces as aesthetically pleasing, and worthy of repeated and concentrated attention was to assert herself against the promises of heteronormativity. John's female friends at the Slade all began their adult lives in shared rented rooms, a utopian vision of homosociality attested to by John's 1898 painting *Interior with Figures*, which shows Gwen Salmond and Ida Nettleship huddled attentively over a book in a bare, elegant bedroom. However, both women would marry and start families soon after, trading in their self-contained and autonomous existences for safety and societal approval. Sara Ahmed argues that 'feelings are attributed to objects, such that some things and not others become happiness and unhappiness causes.'²⁷ While the traditional familial home was marked as aspirational in its promise of happiness, the rented, single occupancy room could be regarded as an 'unhappiness cause' at the turn of the century; this was especially true for women who had reached marriageable age. Ahmed argues that inscribing objects or spaces as happy is not a neutral act, or an objective barometer of public feeling, but forms part of a broader social context in which 'claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood

²⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 14.

valuable'.²⁸ John's refusal to admit the more challenging aspects of communal, precarious living might be understood as an attempt to resignify objects and spaces with different meanings in relation to happiness. John was aware, therefore, of her painting's public function, more so than is often assumed of her given her reluctance to exhibit and sell; she was aware, perhaps, of how paintings create social realities as well as reflect them. There was happiness in being alone, her paintings insist, in ignoring proposals, in being childless, in dedicating one's life to art rather than others; there was happiness in earning little and acquiring little. An unmarried woman who was uninterested in reproduction did not have value within John's society – or their value was marginal, eccentric, exceptional – but John's attention to her own space, as well as her continued claims to its ability to generate and maintain happiness, work against the belittling mechanisms of normativity.

The rented room might be thought of as operating within and through what Jack Halberstam conceptualises as a queer temporality, through which one 'leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance.'²⁹ Halberstam says of queer time and space that they develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction, and via alternative logics of location, movement and identification. The ways of being made possible by queer time, 'strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices' as Halberstam puts it, are all enabled by the realities of the rented room. Consider John abandoning one room for another on a whim, because rental agreements were loose and spontaneous and easily broken; consider her accounts of occasionally sleeping through the day, taking visits from lovers and friends in the afternoons, often prioritising those visits over wage labour; observe her painting at odd hours, doing 'so many canvases to be thrown away' as she told Tyrwhitt, and barely scraping

²⁸ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 11.

²⁹ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. (New York, NYU Press, 2005), 2.

together the money for rent.³⁰ John's queerness was therefore as much a sexual identity (she had relationships with women and men) as it was 'a way of life,'³¹ in Michel Foucault's formulation: her reality shared very little content with that of an ordinary heterosexual woman of her time; it had different daily practices and fantasies, and entirely alien aspirations.³² Halberstam's theory allows us to reframe the precarity of the rented room as a defiant queer gesture against reproductive futurism, as a deliberate withdrawal from a heterosexual lifestyle and its promises. 'We create longevity as the most desirable future,' Halberstam writes, 'applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances), and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity.'³³ John appeared to share this indifference towards the future and her possible legacy: she continued renting into late middle age, and had no property or wealth to pass on to another generation; as an artist she never developed an interest or business acumen in selling or exhibiting her work.

The room represented an alternative way of being for middle class women, and one especially amenable to those identifying – whether or not explicitly, whether or not through sexual acts – with queerness. A charged site for their emotional and sexual identities, the room would also become for an emerging group of women artists and writers the core of their professional lives too, a condition of possibility responsive to their emotional and artistic needs. Access to communal living for single women in metropolitan centres allowed women to direct all of their energy into their art, and connected to other women who were similarly estranged from family and absorbed in its creative alternative. Discussing New Woman fiction of the fin-

³⁰ John, *Letters and Notebooks*, 54.

³¹ Much contemporary queer theory that stresses sexual identity as a way of life – rather than something reducible to acts – builds upon the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. See: 'Queer and Now' in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press) pp. 1-20. Sedgwick herself draws on, amongst other things, Michel Foucault, whose 'Friendship as a Way of Life' was one of the first texts to centre the issue: 'This notion of mode of life seems important to me. Will it require the introduction of a diversification different from the ones due to social class, differences in profession and culture, a diversification that would also be a form of relationship and would be a "way of life"? A way of life can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity.'

³² Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2.

³³ *Ibid*, 17.

de-siècle, texts in which the room was ascribed primacy in women's personal development, Heilman describes the room as a site of 'regeneration' that provided 'the space and inspiration necessary for moral and philosophical enquiry and, finally, artistic activity.'³⁴ Surveying literature by women, Heilman shows how emotional and sexual discovery were frequently linked to artistic development, which were both tied to the quest for a private living and working space. The element of privacy was undoubtedly crucial, but the room's semi-publicness, and their role in constituting units within a broader network would facilitate and open up the lives of women artists especially. Indeed, the desire for a private living and working space was 'strangely paradoxical' in linking directly to, or being an expression of, a desire for public independence, or for a substitute network of public spaces.³⁵ Hana Leaper describes how rented rooms doubled up as teaching spaces, studios, and salons, together formulating an alternative artistic network that operated outside of the aggressive heteromascularity of modernist cultural sites like clubs, restaurants, cafes, bars and art schools.³⁶ Women were able to live, study, paint, exchange ideas and model for each other in atmospheres that ran on mutual interest and care rather than competition. Having space through which to meet and develop their practices, Leaper continues, was all the more important given their continued lack of visibility in public discourse.³⁷ Katy Deepwell's review of census records illustrates how more women than ever were entering art school and identifying themselves professionally as artists, yet major exhibitions and reviews continued to focus almost exclusively on male painters.³⁸ Not content to simply be appended onto male public institutions, or poorly assimilated into spaces in which they continued to dominate, rented rooms would come to function as a 'counterpublic' in the sense described by Nancy Fraser: 'contest(ing) the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating

³⁴ Heilmann 'Feminist Resistance, the Artist and "A Room of One's Own" in New Woman Fiction', 293.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hana Leaper, 'Immortal Apples and Eternal Eggs: Life and Still Life in the Bedsits of Bloomsbury' in *Bedsits and Boarding Houses in Modern English Life, Literature and Film*, ed. by Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018)

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Katy Deepwell, *Women Artists between the Wars: A Fair Field and No Favour* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech.³⁹ Rita Felski, similarly and usefully describes a ‘counterpublic’ as ‘an oppositional public arena for the articulation of women’s needs in critical opposition to the values of a male-defined society.’⁴⁰ As such, communities of companionship, politicisation, aesthetic influence and networking were constituted and organised differently to those of the dominant avant-gardes. Rather than confine herself to an exclusive circle of artists, John worked and shared ideas with many amateur women painters and sculptors, women unaffiliated with groups, elderly women, women who had trained but subsequently given up their work for wage labour, women who were models or single mothers without a practice but with an interest in art, and women who worked in forms afforded less cultural space, like crafts. John’s letters with Ursula Tyrwhitt, in which they share translation work, discuss exhibitions, share reading recommendations, comment on one another’s art and exchange postcard reproductions of artworks they admire, exemplifies the alternative practices and behaviours that constituted this female, domestic counterpublic: care, mutual interest, love, respect and an intellectual and emotional recognition of one another prevailed over the promotion of any individual ego.⁴¹

The dialogue amongst these women’s work is less immediately obvious than between members of avant-gardes: in part this is because so much material by women from this period is lost, their names and careers forgotten, or not available in public collections.⁴² However, there are strong parallels between John’s work and those artists and their works retrievable from her circle in Paris. These women artists also painted interiors, and with remarkably similar motifs and styles, suggesting this subject was one formulated in concert, shaped by dialogue and in the

³⁹ Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere’, *Social Text*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (1990), 57

⁴⁰ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: feminist literature and social change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 166.

⁴¹ See: NLW, NLWMS 22283B, Gwen John, Exercise Book, 1913–1926; NLW, NLW MS 22300 B, GJ, Draft Letters 1919–1939.

⁴² As an example, Gwen Salmond and Ida Nettleship (later Ida John), the women who feature in John’s early work *Interior with Figures* (1898), were artists trained at the Slade, but both have very little surviving work. As the women all lived and worked together in close quarters, it is likely they made similar work, but this can only ever be a speculative assertion in the circumstances.

spaces in which they most frequently met. Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd's interior (in which John is a model) and Ursula Tyrwhitt's interior are notable examples of this shared visual language. In Tyrwhitt's painting a woman sits upright, gazing ahead from a curtained bed, a structure which creates a room within a room, a heightened site of seclusion into which the painting invites special access. The self-sufficiency of this enclosed world is alluded to in the sky blue fabric smudged with streaks of cumulus white behind her, a technique reminiscent of Italian Renaissance paintings of the Madonna set against opaque blue backdrops, and comparable in its function and style to that used by John in *La Chambre Sur le Cour*, in which the blue curtain gathered by the window is a substitute for an expected exterior view. The mood is ambiguous: the woman is posed in a neutral manner, without any of the contrivances or artifice normally associated with female models, and her expression is unclear; she is simply there, her comportment unchanged by the gaze of the painter, deep in thought. Indeed, the blurring of her facial features ensures no pressure is placed upon the figure to reveal, perform or adjust her emotions, as women are often compelled to do in the maintenance of the family's emotional ecosystem, as 'teachers of compassion and surrogates for others' refusals or incapacities to feel appropriately and intelligently' as Lauren Berlant succinctly puts it.⁴³ Tyrwhitt's room is a safe, private space in which women's introspection might flourish, a process the work renders equivalent with vital spiritual work, as the subtle religious iconography and monastic hush further stress, and all in a space apart from heterosexual convention and its consequences, rather like a convent. Further, unlike the traditional nude of the art historical canon, or nineteenth century representations of women asleep (such as those painted by Edouard Vuillard, to name one example known to women artists in Paris at this time) Tyrwhitt's subject is awake, sat in an inelegant fashion which does not seek to eroticise or aestheticize her body, absorbed in her own act of looking – inward, and out onto a domestic world over which she has total dominion. Her

⁴³ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 170.

bright pink flesh, substantial physical presence, and modest nightgown, as well as the additional protection and obfuscation of the bedspread pulled over her lower body, defiantly refuse the priorities of the male gaze.



Figure 4: Ursula Tyrwhitt, *Woman sitting on a bed*, c. 1930s, The National Library of Wales.

Lloyd's painting of John similarly subverts the simple eroticism of nineteenth century representations of women in bed. In Lloyd's painting the room is a composite of cream, grey and pastel tones, with lilac brushstrokes at the pillow, and a glimmer of yellow to mark the outline of the object the sitter's gaze is trained towards. The setting is modest, inconspicuous, without the most obvious trappings of middle class femininity. What matters in this room, one might infer from the spare rendering of this space, is solely the art to which the painting is addressed. The sitter is nude, but veiled by the imprecision of her form; she is not titillating flesh, but carefully mixed and applied paint. In Tyrwhitt and Lloyd's paintings, anonymity is afforded to the sitters not so as to render objectification easier, what might be said to motivate the flattening or blurring of women's features in modernist portraiture by men, but to grant them freedom, respect and dignity. Like Tyrwhitt, Lloyd's room is one of thought, creative action and learning: although the formal qualities of the picture leave the exact details of the object unclear – it might be either a letter or a book – John's bent, concentrated posture suggest she is reading.

The model and the painter are here both active, engaged in their own creative pursuits, rather than arranged hierarchically as subject and object. In both paintings, the blurred materiality of the women suggest subjects in the process of what Rosi Braidotti describes as a ‘becoming’, in which women experience themselves as ‘complex, endowed with multiple capacities for interconnectedness’, and the room as the space in which this project of self-formation is staged.⁴⁴ Looking at Lloyd and Tyrwhitt, it is clear we are witness to a room that is both a real space and a metaphor: at once an enabling context and representation of a rich, complicated and pleasurable interiority. For Lloyd, Tyrwhitt and John, this muted, thoughtful, homosocial, and intimate style of painting was its own subversive sub-genre of interior scene in which the latent eroticism of the room is set aside, considered less aesthetically and emotionally interesting than a vision of women as they were in private. Thinking of consciousness in the spatial terms Lloyd, Tyrwhitt and John make use of what was a distinctly modernist, Freudian trope which blurred the distinctions between mind and matter.



Figure 5: Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd, *Gwen John*, 1905, The National Library of Wales.

⁴⁴ Rosi Braidotti, ‘Becoming Woman: Or Sexual Difference Revisited’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 20, No.3, (2003), 43.

Room/Mind

Stephen Frosh contends that ‘modernist perceptions of subjectivity, individuality, memory and sociality are all deeply entwined with a psychoanalytic sensitivity.’⁴⁵ It is this ‘two way traffic’ between psychoanalysis and the arts that can be taken as a starting point when thinking about John’s spatial mapping of the self.⁴⁶ Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud’s work at the intersection of medical science, sociology, affect theory and the wildly speculative was becoming known across Europe at the turn of the century, bringing together the study of dreams, verbal slippages and childhood memories in the understanding of the psyche. With ‘the acceleration of technological change, dislocation wrought by urbanization and the capitalist economy, the waning of religious convictions,’ as Beth Blum summarises it, subjects were never more vulnerable to the explanatory, organisational frameworks offered by psychoanalytic discourse.⁴⁷ This turn inward would be critical across modernist culture, but it was the expression and conception of consciousness through spatial metaphors, especially those rooted in the home, which made psychoanalytic discourse so pertinent to the visual arts. Freud famously announced that the self was no longer ‘master in its own house,’ and instead, as Maud Ellman puts it, ‘this house is haunted by the return of the repressed, the restless traces of an inaccessible past.’⁴⁸ Psychoanalysis was not the only discourse making use of spatial metaphors: Berry points out that neuro-psychologists and hypnotists were also developing theories of the mind that identified psychic interiority with spatial interiority.⁴⁹ Like Shoshana Feldman, I regard ‘implication’ rather than ‘application’ as the appropriate means through which to think about psychoanalysis in relation to art, and will briefly trace how John’s work pre-empts, invites, and – crucially –

⁴⁵ Stephen Frosh, ‘Psychoanalysis in Britain: “The rituals of destruction”’ in *A Concise Companion to Modernism* ed. David Bradshaw (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 116

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Beth Blum, ‘Modernism’s Anti-Advice’, *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (2017), 119.

⁴⁸ Maud Ellman, ‘The Foundation of the Unconscious: Schelling, Freud and the Birth of the Modern Psyche (Book Review)’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 42, No. 1, (2015), 219.

⁴⁹ Francesca Berry, ‘Designing the Reader’s Interiors: Subjectivity and the Woman’s Magazine in Early Twentieth Century France’, *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (Spring 2005), 63.

contests and alters the theories brought to bear upon it.⁵⁰ Studying John's work through this framework is not with the intention of uncovering hidden truth about her psyche – it is exactly that kind of reductive, hermeneutic paranoia I hope to avoid in this thesis – but about opening her work out, reading into it a model of consciousness shaped by a variety of discourses and perspectives, not merely psychoanalytic, but phenomenological and feminist too.

Freud imagined consciousness as split between three planes, id, ego and superego: only the outer band – a mere fraction of the psyche – is available to the subject; the rest is sublimated beyond reach. This stratified consciousness is alluded to in the structure of John's room in *La Chambre Sur La Cour*: the walls and windows form a rectangular pattern that is met by the architecture of the outer building and the interior of the room beyond, creating a tiered structure, and one in which certain elements – as in Freud's model – are more visible than others. However, unlike in Freud's model of consciousness, in John's metaphor that which is apart is not necessarily obscure or unreachable: tactile and visual sensations lend every part of the room a distinct, heightened presence. What is stressed is difference rather than distance, texture rather than depth: in affect and style, John's metaphor for the mind could not be further from the visualisation often used for Freud's model of consciousness, one which he had suggested in writing in 1915, the iceberg submerged in water.⁵¹ John's painting offers up numerous materials to linger over, touch and uncover: three kinds of coloured fabric make up the curtains, their contrasting textures implied by the distinction between the thin white paint used for the lace and the solid rendering of the blue material by its side. John's black dress spreads out beyond her body, enveloping the chair she sits on, extending out onto the tiles, and draws the eye from the colour and light that fills the rest of the frame. These various materials are transparent or opaque, weighty or captured in movement, covering or drawn away from bodies and surfaces.

⁵⁰ Shoshana Feldman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 75.

⁵¹ See: C. D. Green, Where did Freud's iceberg metaphor of mind come from? *History of Psychology*, Vol. 22, No. 4, (2019), 369–372.

Textiles are, as Ana Muñoz Martín reminds us, ‘a zone of transition between inside and outside, both point of access and boundary,’ rendering their intensified presence in John’s painting a form of restatement on the room’s ontological and social status, the liminality discussed earlier in this chapter.⁵² The layered architecture created by the materials also strikingly resembles psychoanalytic theories of the self, visualising the acts of concealment, repression, illumination and access that constitute the subject’s psychic life. Material was used symbolically throughout the Victorian art that John developed her own practice through: Keren Hammerschlag argues that for Frederic Leighton, amongst others, the ‘masses of creased, crumpled and folded drapery [...] represent the meanderings of the subconscious.’⁵³ For John, arguably, it is a process far more controlled than Hammerschlag’s ‘meandering’ suggests. The level of detail in the image, along with the many different textures and patterns which distinguish one object from another, seek to categorise and define the elements of the room with precision, modelling a form of control and self-awareness which the conventional psychoanalytic model of the psyche forecloses. There is a reparative impulse as well as an abiding optimism to this representation of consciousness: in John’s image, it is a richly realised and harmonious space without unpleasant drives or inherent inner divisions, over which the subject themselves (rather than the analyst) has authority and understanding.

The attention to detail in John’s representation of the room insists upon the presence and solidity of each surface, and affirms the outlines of each object, as though fearing any blurring of those boundaries might spread beyond the canvas and into the tenor of the metaphor – the mind. This anxiety about the stability of the self runs throughout psychoanalytically inflected modernist literature. In Woolf’s 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway*, the traumatised former soldier Septimus Smith feels the movement in the trees as a threat to his bodily autonomy, as if

⁵² Ana Muñoz Martín, ‘Bodies on the Threshold: The Significance of Fabrics in John Singer Sargent’s Male Nudes, 1890–1915’, *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 19, No. 1, (2018), 70.

⁵³ Keren Hammerschlag, ‘The Deathly Sleep of Frederic Leighton’s Painted Women’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (2012), 203.

he were helplessly linked to their material presence, and hallucinates the form of his dead friend amongst ordinary urban scenery.⁵⁴ In her 1931 novel *The Waves*, it is Rhoda who fears dissolving into the puddle she cannot bear to cross, a scene that Woolf lifts directly from her own experiences of disassociation as a child, and later records in her 1939 memoir, *A Sketch of the Past*.⁵⁵ The detail, quietude, and stability of John's scene serve to protect against these various forms of coming apart.

What Thomas Foster describes as the 'psychoanalytic model of recollection, repetition and working through' is consistent with John's representations of her interior, which – as discussed earlier in this chapter – she painted repeatedly and from a variety of angles, using a set repertoire of objects and a shared visual idiom.⁵⁶ Although 7 rue St Placide does not appear again in her work, many of its features do: the furniture – the wicker chair, the teapot, the pine table – features across John's interior scenes, as does John herself, mostly clothed in black, alongside her cat. The room she took next was the subject of two significant compositions of the room alone, both titled *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris* and painted between 1907 and 1909. These paintings are remarkably similar, displaying the same chair, shawl, table and lace curtains in near identical arrangements; their similarities, however, break down in revealing ways. A cream parasol is present in one and absent in the other: in the latter iteration, the shawl is heavier and more detailed as though emphasising its presence – its capacity to shelter and protect – to make up for the parasol's loss. However the most explicit distinction between the two centres upon the window: in one the window is ajar, light pouring through, revealing a blue sky and the faint outline of the city's architecture beyond; in the other the curtain is drawn, light emanating softly through the scrim. With this difference comes a slight shift in affect: the repose and sense of restraint evoked by the scene with the drawn curtain yields to a more expansive, searching mood

⁵⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin Classics, 2019), 12.

⁵⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 45.

⁵⁶ Thomas Foster, *Transformations of Domesticity in Modern Women's Writing: Homelessness at Home* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 46.

in the room with the open window. The outline of the city conjures a subject with a less insular outlook, an impression further reinforced by the open book – with it the possibilities of other narratives, alternative worlds – which replaces the pot of flowers in the other version of the painting. These might be different times of day, or works separated by a number of months – merely temporal disparities – but these two paintings also express distinct emotional states. According to her letters, John wavered between the pleasures of being alone and the liberties afforded by wandering the streets of Paris, visiting exhibitions and networking with other artists. These scenes bear witness to John drawing up and working through this tension between solitude and sociability.



Figure 6 and Figure 7: Gwen John, *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1905-7, Museums Sheffield and National Museum Wales.

The room in *A Corner of an Artist's Room in Paris* also features in another set of interior scenes that show John working through issues of the self: *A Lady Reading* (1909-11) and *Girl Reading at a Window* (1911). In the first version, John paints herself with the distinct, rounded, elongated features of Albrecht Durer's Mary, which together with her position by an open

window reading a book reference representations of The Annunciation. These are scenes John was certain to have known, as there are famous examples in The National Gallery in London and the Louvre in Paris, galleries she frequented (the latter especially), not to mention her increasing interest in religious thought, a fixation that would culminate in her conversion to Catholicism in 1913.⁵⁷ In these scenes, Mary is witnessed on the verge of a becoming remarkable in its import, at the moment she discovers herself pregnant with Christ, the open book she must now turn from indicative of a radical coming into knowledge that is also an acceptance of her absolute submission to God. Mary is celebrated for her humility in this moment, the self-sacrifice and renunciation of her desires she displays in turning towards her duties to God. John, however, transplants this representation of woman's subjectivity into her domestic space, and in this revision removes all of Mary's passivity: there is no divine presence, no obligation she must attend to, and so the woman is left to read uninterrupted, suggesting an identity and destiny that is all her own choosing. John's is an image of female maturation that emphasises the flourishing of ambition and intellect, and the dialogue between the two works only pushes this narrative of self-discovery further. John's most significant adjustment to the earlier painting *A Lady Reading* is the inclusion of a self-portrait in *Girl Reading at a Window*: in the latter John appears entirely self-assured, and unlike the melancholic or meek virgin, has a faint smile etched across her face. *A Lady Reading* suggests that establishing an identity may begin with elements of masquerade or illusion, hiding behind conventions or myths about what one's purpose should be, but true self-actualisation as imagined in *Girl Reading at a Window* entails a movement away from these performances, from resignation to recognition of one's true prospects.

The sitter's clothing also undergoes a transformation, moving from soft jewel tones reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite costume – clothes synonymous with a pliant, decorative femininity – to a simple black day dress. The black dress constitutes a subtle intervention into pre-existing

⁵⁷ At The National Gallery, London, there are approximately a dozen Annunciation scenes in the collection. Those by Duccio and Fra Filippo Lippi are perhaps the most famous John would have seen. At the Louvre in Paris, a search of the collection online suggests there are roughly 60 paintings on this theme in the museum.

representations of women on canvas within contemporary visual culture. Discussing Whistler's *Symphony in White, No. 1* (1862), a work John knew from studying under him in Paris, Nicolas Daly describes the alliance of white with women in late Victorian aesthetics, and its role in coding them as vulnerable, as creating female figures akin to 'pure and delicate blossoms; orphans of the storm that is modernity, or angels cast out of the house into a cold world.'⁵⁸ John's embrace of black articulates a rejection of this masculine authored femininity, and imagines in its place a more powerful, agential subjectivity. Neither innocent nor fragile, John holds her book, asserting her right to knowledge, wearing a black which only enlarges the proportions of her body.



Figure 8 and Figure 9: Gwen John, *A Lady Reading*, 1909-11, and *Girl Reading at a Window*, 1911, Tate and The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁵⁸ Nicolas Daly, 'The Woman in White: Whistler, Hiffernan, Courbet, Du Maurier', *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 12, No. 1, (2005), 2.

At this juncture, moving away from psychoanalysis, I turn again to Woolf, who in 1926 wrote in her diary ‘the truth is, one can’t write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes.’⁵⁹ In John’s painting, likewise, our attention is directed away from the sitter – neither her face nor dress possess much suggestive detail – and towards the careful rendering of objects, fabrics, and décor. Woolf has a suggestion for where one might have better luck in understanding the psyche, and one that is commensurate with John’s painting. ‘Look at the ceiling,’ she goes on to urge in the same diary entry, ‘at Grizzle (her dog) [...] and the soul slips in.’⁶⁰ Between inanimate surfaces and animals, different entities and other species, the human soul is least conscious of itself, and only then, without the artifice wrought by others, Woolf argues, can it make itself authentically known, and become visible to the writer hoping to record its texture and movements. John’s work exhibits a similar belief through its meticulous description of the wallpaper, flooring and furniture of her room, an account of her everyday environment through which her subjectivity is filtered. Just as John paints the same table and teacup repeatedly throughout her oeuvre, reaching towards the states of being they bear witness to and express, in *The Waves* Woolf’s protagonist comes to realise that ‘the coffee cup, the table’ are more expressive of his subjective reality than any ‘book of phrases’.⁶¹ Woolf and John both propose that a subject’s perception of their immediate, concrete surroundings is more likely to be revealing of their emotional investments, everyday preferences and desires – which they consistently project onto space, reshaping and re-signifying it in the process – than any amount of self-conscious introspection. Neither Woolf nor John’s soul can be separated from the ceiling, nor distinguished from the ordinary objects upon which its routines are so dependent: for both, the material and the psychological are forever making and re-making each other. As Bill Brown notes in relation to Woolf, we ‘use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to

⁵⁹ Virginia Woolf and Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3: 1925-30* (London: Mariner Books, 1981), 62.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Woolf, *The Waves*, 227.

organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies,' and it is this proximity between subject and object, or the diverse uses we make of objects as subjects, which John's work visualises.⁶²

Woolf's understanding of subject formation is, you might say, phenomenological, in so much as it resembles the ideas of Emile Durckheim, who used the term 'lived space' to refer to the link between spatial and psychological mood, and from there built towards and understanding of, as Elisabeth Bronfen puts it, 'the individual's constitutive relation to his or her space.'⁶³ Martin Heidegger also explored the blurring of boundaries between the individual and the spaces they inhabit, conceptualising dwelling as not merely an act of location, but the experience of living in a particular place, arguing that this situatedness constitutes a fundamental dimension of existence.⁶⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty likewise understood the body's relation to space as fundamentally constitutive, as 'the way in which the body comes into being as a body.'⁶⁵ Durckheim, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty – amongst other phenomenological thinkers – all share a belief in the mutual implication between subject and space: lived space is mediated through the body of the subject, and is shaped by their corporeal and psychic reality. Working from the phenomenological tradition, feminist theorists developed the notion of the corporeal subject, which, as Sara Ahmed summarises, expounds the belief that 'bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling.'⁶⁶ The corporeal subject is reified by a variety of environmental factors – clothing, food, cosmetics, interiors – inscribed and reinscribed by particular habits and practices. Space, and all the adjustments being in a space entails, in other words, is what constructs and defines the subject. Iris Marion Young makes this theory specifically applicable to the home, writing that it is not

⁶² Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 4.

⁶³ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Dorothy Richardson's Art of Memory: Space, Identity, Text* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 32.

⁶⁴ Martin Heidegger, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 1975), 141-161.

⁶⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), 172.

⁶⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.

merely the presence of personal belongings in the home that is constitutive of the self, 'but their arrangement in space in a way that supports the body habits and routines of those who dwell there.'⁶⁷ Compared in necessarily broad strokes to psychoanalysis, these formulations of subjectivity focus on existence rather than the unconscious, specific being-in-the-world rather than generalised theories of human nature, and are animated by a belief that, in Grosz's summary, 'objects make the self and thus produce our reality.'⁶⁸

If we apply these statements to John's *La Chambre sur la Cour*, then what might we conclude about the subjectivity John constructs? What traits and behaviours, emotions and preferences, did this small quantity of modest furniture enclosed within a simply decorated room elicit? A pink curtain that echoes the shape of John's dress is pushed to one side, revealing a wall on the other side of the courtyard adorned by a small mirror, a series of shapes that create a nesting doll structure of rectangular frames. The string of recurring forms presents the room as continuous with the spaces beyond the threshold, reflecting an understanding of solitude and sociality in which the two states are not in binary opposition, but co-constituted. This proposal is restated by the presence of the hat, an arbiter between interior and exterior placed within reach of John's figure: the hat suggests that the movement across and between these worlds – the room and the street – is not a colossal shifting of modes, but is merely a supplementary, alternative way of inhabiting the same self. In one sketchbook from around the time of this work's composition, John's gaze moves from people's heads seen from behind and drawn from a distance in cafes or churches, only to lurch suddenly back into her room, and with that movement comes a change in form, from drawn to the written. Accounting for her room and its absences, she writes a list in her still uncertain second language, beginning with '3 tables, 1 armoire à glace, 2 glaces, 1 sommies', and going on to pick up side tables and chairs before returning to drawings of the street on the next page.⁶⁹ Between one sheet and another, John's

⁶⁷ Iris Marion Young, 'House and Home' in *On Female Body Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 139.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 167.

⁶⁹ National Library of Wales (NLW), NLWMS22299A, Gwen John, Sketches 1920s–1930s.

mind rearranges itself. The list imagines the distinction between a private and public self as a difference in perception akin to the visual and verbal, or English and French. Perhaps one is a more natural fit; perhaps the other requires practice. The manoeuvring between the stimulation of intersubjectivity and the balancing effects of solitude is here presented as at the core of the sitter's being in the world.

John's painting offers a representation of the affective experiences at the centre of the self this room encloses. The objects she has chosen to so carefully detail, her sewing material, spotless tiles, and her pet, emphasise the centrality of care, creativity and responsibility to John's understanding of her personhood. This room and its contents create and sustain a self oriented around attention, interest, attachment and curiosity. This was a common way of framing the single domicile room in New Woman fiction of the fin-de-siècle, and John uses comparable means to women writers to describe her room in this way.⁷⁰ In *La Chambre sur La Cour*, John is sewing: opening up contemplative space, sewing is an exercise in patience, duration, and attention to detail. As an activity understood to elicit a particular kind of thought, sewing was also used by women writers like Woolf as a device through which to figure the process of thinking itself. Clarissa is observed sewing in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*: 'her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly to the belt.'⁷¹ The long sentence is broken into small clauses that acquire energy from gerunds ('drawing') and adverbs ('smoothly' 'lightly'), and slow down through past participles ('collected' 'attached'), a movement evocative of the flow, accumulation and stalling of thought. The meandering length and pace of this sentence evokes daydream, relaxation; however, elsewhere in the novel, Rezia Warren's sewing is figured as an equivalent to, or a version of, a more fretful thought process. Coming upon her husband in a state of turmoil, Rezia's contented chattering dissolves into a shared jitteriness: 'Hat, child, Brighton, needle. She built it up; first one thing,

⁷⁰ See: Heilman, 'Feminist Resistance, the Artist and "A Room of One's Own",' 291-308.

⁷¹ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 43.

then another, she built it up, sewing.⁷² Disconnected objects and experiences are brought into hurried, anxious relation to one another through free indirect speech which ties together the thoughts of Septimus and Rezia. The needle draws together, pauses over, and collects fragments in the formation of a whole, attaching one thing – one scrap of material, one idea, one scene – to another, processes that are as much allied to the work of craft as they are to perception. For Woolf and John, sewing becomes a means of visualising thought, a metaphor that is all the more striking in taking a traditionally feminine craft as its vehicle. For the capacity for rational thought has, as Alison Jaggar states, ‘been associated with the mental, the cultural, the universal, the public and the male’ while women have been tied to terms on the other side of this binary.⁷³ Lending sewing this particular metaphorical function, in other words, constitutes a radical challenge to patriarchal epistemology and its system of symbols.

Using sewing as a prominent symbol in the painting possesses a provocative and playful charge, and not just in how it invests women’s practices with perceptual and intellectual power. Consider, for instance, how images of women sewing figured in the Dutch genre painting tradition to which John’s work is indebted. These works see male painters stealing into women’s private spaces, observing them at leisure and in vice, asking the viewer to extract from them a moral worth.⁷⁴ Women’s silk skirts glimmer against dark wood, and light moves through windows illuminating their faces, indicative of their virtue. They read; they are good wives; they play music; they are good mothers; they sew; they are good daughters; they make lace; they are productive and obedient; they are the glowing centres of domestic spaces. When women’s vanities are glimpsed, they are quickly chastised. With its iridescent light and contained space, John’s work absorbs the idiom of the Dutch genre painting, and in doing so makes visible the years of research given over to this apparently spontaneous everyday scene. Not content merely

⁷² Ibid, 160.

⁷³ Alison Jaggar, ‘Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology’, *Inquiry*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1989), 151.

⁷⁴ See: Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of virtue: women and domesticity in seventeenth-century Dutch art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

to copy, John sets about rewriting the values at the genre's core. In the Dutch tradition, the painter's control over and distance from domesticity is stressed, while John explicitly places herself inside the scene. Nobody would define the space on her behalf, nor would they instruct her on its true worth. John paints herself into the tradition, and slips into its implied virtue, but without any attachment to a household, and with a life centred around the distinctly self-serving pleasures of solitude and art. The challenge is clear: under John's direction, and circulated through her work, virtue might accommodate an entirely different kind of woman.

In Dutch genre painting, embroidery is synonymous with feminine virtue, but in John's work it might be as much a marker of goodness as it is, in Rosika Parker's formulation, 'a weapon of resistance', which directly responded to its function for women as a 'source of restraint'.⁷⁵ As Parker details across her comprehensive study of the subject, the history of women and needlework is one of ingenuity and resistance, and reveals the lengths women went to in making art out of the conditions of oppression. With formal training denied to so many women, they were forced to make do with the materials at hand, and to ignore the practical or emotional servility of the few opportunities they had to practise their skill. They made and fixed clothes, for themselves and their dependents; they embroidered samplers that broadcast moral messages; they kept the small worlds around them from unravelling. The embroideries were modest, and in never claiming the same high cultural space as painting were destined to be dismissed as trivial, but they were essential in the development and professionalisation of women's creativity. What was designed as a method of rendering women more pliant, to fill their time and exploit their labour and limit their ambitions, became a covert form of artistic self-possession. John understood from experience the capacity of women's sewing to empower its creator and unsettle others. The dress that so offended her father was an interpretation of a garment from an Édouard Manet painting. At once a considered creative response, a synthesis of

⁷⁵ Rosika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), xix.

paint and fabric, and a celebration of female sensuality and joyfulness, the immediacy of which was enhanced through being worn on the body, the dress was a meeting of intellect and embodiment transgressive enough to enrage her father. In *La Chambre sur la Cour*, John takes the needle to acknowledge all the women who came before her, and to make clear that her own practice was made possible not by a lineage of male Old Master painters, but by women who sewed.

Sewing spoke to a historical consciousness as well as a distinct artistic ethic. Demanding endless patience and an exacting attention to detail, needlework is slow. The attractions of it were obvious to John, who had been resisting an art of speed since her education at the Slade: she would dedicate months (even years) to individual works. Her notebooks show how each painting was drawn from a wealth of research and planning: pages announce a subject – be it *bonbons* or *forget-me-nots* – then notes on their thematic resonance and studies into colour fill the space beneath; some titled pages remain completely blank – not enough time having elapsed for the work to have come to fruition.⁷⁶ ‘Do not be hurried’ was practical guidance to herself, a note on her routines and methods; it was also an aesthetic instruction, reflecting John’s tireless commitment to working through a single theme or composition – portraits of women, and bare interiors – and even to a particular painting process.⁷⁷ Over the decades John’s style altered only subtly, and the same subjects were repeated across scores of canvases. What this ultimately effects on canvas is a sense of suspended time: every work in John’s oeuvre looks as though it were completed in one elongated moment.

Sewing transforms into reading when John reconfigures *La Chambre sur La Cour* as the pair of later works already discussed, *A Lady Reading* and *Girl Reading at a Window*. The composition of the former and the activity at the centre of the paired paintings evokes representations of St. Jerome, the patron saint of scholars, translators and librarians famed for

⁷⁶ NLW, NLW MS 22292 B, Gwen John, Exercise Book, 1933.

⁷⁷ NLW, NLWMS22281B, Gwen John, Exercise Book, 1910–1912. NLWMS22281B, 18 November 1911.

his intellectual pursuits and productivity. Like many saints the story of Jerome is one of hardship overcome. St. Jerome retreats from society and heads for the desert, and spends years moving through a wilderness that is his own penitence. Faith transforms him, and on his return to Rome theological tracts follow, impressive in volume and skill. A wounded lion terrifies his peers in the monastery but moves Jerome, and his healing of its paw turns the wild creature into a faithful pet, an eerie reversal which give him further cause for belief. St. Jerome is depicted in paintings as John is here, engaged in a precise private activity – he reads or writes, while John sews – and like her he is alone except for his cat, fierceness softened into docility by his side. St Jerome’s room is especially pertinent within the narrative of his sainthood in coming after a period of penance and hardship in the wilderness: this redemptive arc adds further affective texture to John’s work, reiterating its sense of refuge, safety and harmony. Further, St Jerome’s acts of generosity – the healing of the lion – constitute an additional emotional drive in the work, framing the room as a space that inspires compassion, care and kindness, as a field in which enriching and surprising intimacies might flourish. There is an aspirational quality to John’s identification with St. Jerome, an icon of accomplishment and righteousness, but there is also a certain impudence, a puckish disregard for patriarchal figures. The distance between an ordinary woman and a symbol of intellectual and religious authority is collapsed, and radically so; our labours are not so different, John’s pose states. Uniting the symbolism of sewing and St. Jerome is a set of highly inventive and distinct aesthetic strategies that lay claim to the room as a place of contemplation, compassion and interest, the radical charge of which John appears to acknowledge in the elevation of women’s craft and the affectionate deflation of male saints.

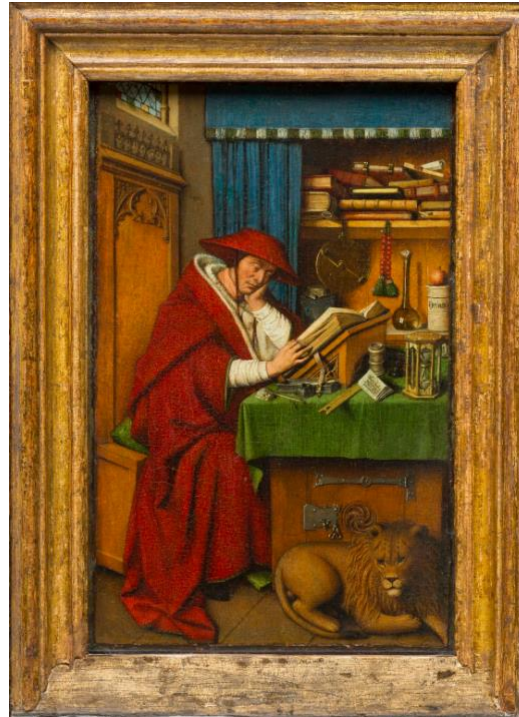


Figure 9: Jan van Eyck, *Saint Jerome in His Study*, ca. 1435 oil on linen paper on oak panel, 206 × 133 mm (© Detroit Institute of Arts)

The emphasis on interestedness and attention in John's paintings is all the more striking when compared to modernism's slew of distracted, bored and antagonistic women. In John's work reading is about knowledge, engagement and presence, and it is equally about feelings: as Roland Barthes argues, 'in reading, all the body's emotions are present'.⁷⁸ Boredom, understood as a devastating lack of affect – the opposite of the phenomena Barthes describes – is characteristic, Pease argues, of middle class modern gendered subjectivity, but is hard to locate in John's work.⁷⁹ Pease explains that with better education than ever before, and stirred by the beginnings of suffrage, women were coming to desire a more active subjectivity at once with understanding their exclusion from such a reality within the entrenched asynchrony of a patriarchal society.⁸⁰ For middle and upper class white women, Pease writes, a perceived emptiness to their existence, an absence of will or vocation or actively sought out and satisfied

⁷⁸ Roland Barthes, 'On Reading' in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 39.

⁷⁹ Pease, *Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom*, 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

pleasure, brought about a mass experience of paralysis and alienation.⁸¹ Pease follows these bored women as they emerge in literature of the period, but they are visible too across visual culture: look, for instance, at Berthe Morisot's *The Artist's Sister at a Window* (1869). Morisot's woman sits with her head down, her body slumped, holding a fan she idly pries apart. Although sat by an open window, at first glance it appears she is gazing vacantly down at the fan; on closer inspection, the sitter's eyes are closed, rendered in vague, minimal brushstrokes to stress her remove from sight and signification. Morisot's sitter averts her eyes from urban life, the intellectual pursuit represented by the desk behind, even the play suggested by the fan. The fan is used to conceal, to alleviate heat, or as a fashionable accessory, but here it sits limply in her grasp, having lost its functionality and meaning, rather like the sitter. The fan could be a joke about levity – a way of insinuating the sitter's insubstantial life. A glimpse of red by the window marks where her foot rests, but the concealment of all but the tip of her shoe only underlines her paralysis. The bow in her hair and at her neck, along with the gold band at her wrist bring to mind the various ways of being confined, and of yearning to unravel particular strictures, to cut loose. A subtle contrast in palette distinguishes the liveliness of urban life from the sobriety of the domestic: the bright green awnings create a vibrant mood in the world beyond, whereas indoors the colours are damp, low-lit, organised around the washed-out lavender that upholsters the chair. Morisot's sitter has given herself up to boredom, and it envelops her like the extravagant white dress she wears, weighing her down and constricting her movement. She is as lifeless and as ornamental as the furniture that surrounds her. The sitter was Morisot's sister, and she was pregnant when the painting was executed; this biographical detail connects women's reproductive destiny in the nineteenth century to their limited horizons and its pervasive, flattened affect. With one's life entirely predetermined from childhood, with no surprises and no

⁸¹ Ibid.

deviations from this fate, there was little else to do but settle into the given environment and wait passively for the foretold events to unfold.



Figure 10: Berthe Morisot, *The Artist's Sister at a Window*, 1869, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Yet what is striking about Morisot's image is how closely John's composition echoes it: Janet Wolff has noted the similarities between the two artists – essentially their shared interest in women as subjects – but far more revealing is where those parallels end.⁸² Both paintings show women sat by open windows, their hands kept busy by a leisure activity, situated in the interiors within which they were most familiar. Yet John's sitter is lent a sense of presence and self-possession: she is concentrated on her task, enjoyment inscribed into her slightly upturned lips; she is actively making something while Morisot's woman unmakes the fan by stripping it of its ordinary function. The piece of cloth John's sitter holds matches her dress, stressing the relevance of this activity to her self-development: it is an extension of herself, a form of identity practice. Morisot's sitter is not granted anything as productive as sewing or interesting as reading

⁸² Janet Wolff, 'Artist and the Flaneur: Rodin, Rilke and Gwen John in Paris', in *The Flaneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994), 113.

material (as in John's other paintings): there are no materials with which to shore up or fortify herself; what we see is inactivity inflected only by thoughts of performance and appearance, alluded to in the fan, its alliance with the cosmetic. While John is shown gathering and grafting her identity into new forms, engaged in a skilled act of self-representation, Morisot's sitter holds her redundant object, wholly disconnected from her world.

Beyond the flâneur/flâneuse

The subjectivity John formulates – grounded in contentment, attention, and interest, patience and slowness – differs significantly from those paradigmatic to modern life. The flâneur was born out of Baudelaire's late nineteenth century writings, and named, reproduced and celebrated in the 1920s and 30s most memorably in the work of Walter Benjamin.⁸³ This privileged, affectively detached and sensually engaged man made an impromptu, subversive art out of wandering the streets of Paris, wracked by alienation and self-estrangement, at once embodying, observing and describing a fierce tableau of subjects and urban scenery. There now exists three decades worth of feminist criticism dedicated to revealing the omissions and lack of nuance in the notion of the flâneur, beginning with Griselda Pollock's immensely influential essay on fin-de-siècle French painting. Pollock argues that painting reproduced distinct gendered modernities that hinged upon rigid divisions between public and private space.⁸⁴ Women did not, Pollock argues, live their modernity in the same spaces or even in its details, texture or duration experience the same kind of modernity as men, and this reality is at once reified and reflected by the spaces represented by their painting. Women largely painted domestic space, Pollock argues, going on to list a series of rooms in which women enacted femininity's presiding social rituals and sought inspiration, mixing the apparently deadening with the fiercely creative; excluded are spaces like the study where women did not have dominion. Men of this period, meanwhile, painted the urban publics, itself a radical departure from the model in which art addressed itself

⁸³ Martina Lauster, 'Walter Benjamin's Myth of the Flâneur', *Modern Language Review*, Vol.10, No.2, (2007), 139.

⁸⁴ Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity' in *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2003), 75.

to biblical scenes, historical battles, stately homes and wealthy patrons. Tamara Balducci's book length study is the latest contribution to this debate: in it, she argues that the flâneur has radically narrowed our understanding of the subjectivities and masculinities of fin-de-siècle Paris, and argues against the binary oppositions she believes are maintained by Pollock's model, offering evidence that women roamed in public (although Pollock does include this limited mobility within her essay) and men dwelled in private.⁸⁵

Balducci's argument is perhaps most interesting in highlighting how even the most thoroughly researched and evidenced historical models of lived experience – such as those drawn by Pollock – do not describe everyone, indeed (as in Pollock's case) never claimed to as such. Where does John fit within these definitions and redefinitions of women's place within urban space? Women like Woolf have invited re-reading through theories of the flâneur – these women were, it is argued, formulating a flâneuse subjectivity of their own – but it is striking how thoroughly John's work resists these comparisons, and proves an awkward set of materials to square with recent investigations into women's engagement with urban publics. Although Alicia Foster is eager to stress John's command of public space and engagement with social modernity, it remains the case that John chose to exclusively paint her interiors in Paris, except for a few unfinished paintings of the countryside in Meudon later in life.⁸⁶ John's paintings do not register any interest in urban space in any of its iterations: there are no street scenes, no music halls, no cafes, no parks. The closest one comes in John's work to an urban focus are the watercolour and line drawings of the congregation in her church at Meudon, and arguably what interested John here were the private acts of devotion, the seclusion within the crowd, rather than the communal aspects of the scene. While it is necessary to resist the notion that John was, in Cecily Langdale's words, 'a recluse' – an overly simplistic and undoubtedly gendered myth supported by many other accounts of John, including those by Janet Wolff and David Corbett – by attempting to

⁸⁵ Temma Balducci, *Gender, Space, and the Gaze in Post-Haussmann Visual Culture : Beyond the Flâneur* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017)

⁸⁶ Alicia Foster, *Gwen John*, 40.

claim John as a flâneuse one risks misrepresenting what her work was actually about.⁸⁷ John enjoyed walking, shopping and even sleeping in the Luxembourg Gardens – a detail that has been employed more than once to prove her credentials as a flâneuse – but this does not mean she sought her meaning-making in these spaces, nor saw them as constitutive of her identity.⁸⁸ The attempts to consider John within the framework of the flâneur preclude the possibility her work figured a subjectivity wholly specific to her own experiences as a woman and artist: here are hymns to the capacious pleasures of dwelling in place, to radically enlarging one's inner world, to cultivating soothing daily rituals, to contemplation and self-sufficiency.

Preventing women from accessing the liberated subjectivity of the flâneur was a crisis of presence and vision: as Griselda Pollock explains, women were not considered 'normal occupants' of urban space, and therefore 'did not have the right to look, to stare, scrutinize or watch.'⁸⁹ Women were expected to walk with their eyes trained on the ground, and those who did not – as Peter Walsh's pursuit of a woman who meets his glance in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* illustrates – were assumed to be sex workers, or otherwise sexually permissive or transgressive.⁹¹ It is possible to see John's apparently limited thematic and stylistic repertoire as a response to the injunctions against gazing in urban space, repeatedly asserting her power and ability to look and make meaning within her own home. John's persistent domestic focus asserts an alternative world of aesthetic values, and confers a liberatory creative potential on the room. What John learnt alone in her room she took with her into the city in the form of slim, pocket-sized sketchbooks: although never the subject of full-size compositions, these small format and private images show John engaging with and negotiating her exclusion from the city. These drawings follow John as she trails strangers identified only by their hats, chignons and capes. John stares,

⁸⁷ Cecily Langdale, "John, Gwendolen Mary [Gwen] (1876-1939), Painter." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004; Janet Wolff, 'The artist and the flâneur: Rodin, Rilke and Gwen John in Paris' in *The Flâneur* ed. Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994), 113; David Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art, 1914-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 185;

⁸⁸ Alicia Foster, *Gwen John*, 23.

⁸⁹ Balducci, *Gender, Space, and the Gaze in Post-Haussmann Visual Culture*, 65.

⁹⁰ Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,' 100.

⁹¹ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 52.

loses interest; she finds patterns, attends to what is pretty in a woman's dress or unusual in her bearing. Men hurry away from her. Most of the sketches are abandoned, only part finished, whether through disinterest or rebelliousness: why bother drawing that man in full? (he is only the vanity of his slicked-back hair) why allow him that permanent record? (or a curve of dark felt for his hat) why not leave him merely a silhouette (his flesh and muscle one wavering line) unable to frighten or pursue her?⁹² These new abilities clearly enthralled John, and the sketchbooks fill with the thrills of its practice. The men are in pieces; the women are elegant necks drifting free of their petticoats. These repetitions assert John's right and ability to look, reflecting what Belducci describes as a moment in which 'women of all classes were increasingly exercising their desire to look.'⁹³ For the flâneur looking is just another means of possession, an instrument of domination, inextricable from a masculine will-to-power: it is an aggressive and eroticised optic. For John, however, looking is a means of reclaiming an agency denied to her in urban space, and is, as a consequence, infused with the joys of her newly discovered perceptual freedoms.

As a formal method, repetition was a way for John to explore the experience of being in time, and never is this interest in temporality and style more explicit than in her sketchbooks. In a series of highly unusual compositions, John divides a single sheet of paper into as many as twenty parts, and draws the same interior, normally a single object – a vase of flowers, a Madonna figurine, a cup and saucer – over and over.⁹⁴ The drawings look like a minute parsed into moments. They propose a form of looking in which every tiny difference in light and additional detail is worthy of attention. Yet their feverish record carries a warning. The drawings show the day pulled through the same room again and again; they look like identical months that have gathered into years, even decades. In doing so, the drawings evoke a kind of repetition common to women's lives. John had seen certain friends ruined by the responsibilities of

⁹² NLW, NLWMS22298A, Gwen John, Sketches, 1920s–1930s.

⁹³ Belducci, 65.

⁹⁴ NLW, NLWMS22297B, Gwen John, Rough Sketches and Notes, 1928–1933, August 1928.

housework: faced with a lifetime's worth of monotonous, interminable labour, women who had trained to be artists (such as her brother's wife) had no time or space to think, let alone to create work. Cleaning was always undone hours later, and cooking was the same: no evidence of their labours ever remained. John had worked hard to ensure her life would never be controlled by these routines, and so her fascination with repetition was also a kind of dread, a way of glancing sideways to the life she almost had.

John may be making claim to certain powers with her persistent, repetitive acts of looking, but throughout her work the gaze – or the modality, the approach, the way of seeing – is conscientiously non-oppressive and non-hierarchical. This quality to her work can be observed in her 1927 painting, completed in two known versions, *The Japanese Doll*. The setting is John's studio in Meudon: the perspective has us seated at the table, situated before a series of objects, the backdrop a pared back series of interlocking shapes lit by a small, distant window. A series of boxes, opened and closed, are placed alongside another rectangular shape that resembles a book (the spine faces out towards the viewer) and on the far left there is a candlestick. The doll is set in striking contrast to the plainness of these functional, interchangeable objects and the sobriety of the room's palette: the doll is rendered in a dark, sumptuous colour, rich maroons and navy blues set against the interior's palette of creamy golds. The thematic and stylistic preoccupations of *The Japanese Doll* were located within a larger trend in nineteenth and twentieth century visual culture: in 1854 Japanese ports reopened trade to the West after being closed for over 200 years, and thereafter artists and writers became fascinated with the art and design flooding the markets in Europe. Eager to revolutionize representational practice, Impressionist painters borrowed heavily from Japanese aesthetics and compositional devices, bringing the asymmetry, elevated viewpoints, pure colour fields and compressed space of ukiyo-e prints to their scenes of Parisian life. In London, Lawrence Binyon's lectures on Japanese aesthetics influenced a broad range of

cultural practitioners.⁹⁵ Placing the Japanese doll at the centre of a painting shaped by Japanese aesthetics, making use of its flattened, ambiguous spatiality and blocking of colour, John explicitly acknowledges her debt to this tradition. Refusing the mastery potentially afforded to her as a painter, John does not simply submerge Japanese aesthetics into her own vocabulary, but places her source of inspiration next to the symbols of her own creative practice, marking the parameters of their shared ground. Where conventional modernist Japanism might be said to hinge solely on stylistic borrowings, and a more authoritative and perhaps imperialist urge to appropriate, *The Japanese Doll* reveals John to be more interested in Japanese's work's implicit statements of value about gender, aesthetics and affect. The doll is a decorative, feminine, even (at least in its conventional Western context) trivial object which through the ideological mechanisms of Japanism becomes suffused with aesthetic seriousness and meaning. More broadly, ukiyo-e prints often show women in tactile, sensual arrangements in ordinary domestic space, and it is their mood of absorption and peacefulness which John draws from here.⁹⁶ Much more could be said about this version of Japanism, one practiced by queer women on the margins rather than men with cultural power, focused on affect rather than style, on affinity rather than mastery. However, of interest to this thesis is how this profoundly and radically non-hierarchical approach manifested through John's responses to work from the Western (male) philosophical canon.

⁹⁵ Rupert Richard Arrowsmith, 'The Transcultural Roots of Modernism: Imagist Poetry, Japanese Visual Culture, and the Western Museum System', *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (2011), 28.

⁹⁶ Amongst John's vast archive at The National Library of Wales, only a handful of postcard reproductions from her personal collection survive: significantly one is of a Japanese print. John and Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd, another unmarried woman artist with whom she exchanged deeply emotional letters, discussed on more than one occasion in their correspondence their love of Japanese woodcuts.



Figure 11: Gwen John, *The Japanese Doll*, c.1927, National Museum Wales.

In the archive, a glance at the notebooks illustrate John's commitment to, and passionate interest in, challenging rigid patriarchal forms of thought and cultural power.⁹⁷ In the notebooks, which combine collage, copying and her own writing, John explores the limits of her own perception as a woman, and mounts a challenge to the dominant position (in vision and epistemology) occupied by men. Over time John had cut, copied out and rearranged canonical texts of philosophy, science, art and theology, forming idiosyncratic wholes from snippets of Dante, Donne, Hogarth, Wilde, Carlyle, Saint Augustine and Henri Bergson. John selected and copied out resonant passages, and organised works so as to place them in dialogue with one another, creating her own distinctive anthologies of voices. Where necessary she did her own translations. Some books show her writing and rewriting the same passage over and over, stopping mid-sentence if an error arises, abandoning the sheet altogether – leaving evidence of her mistake intact, a reminder of the worth of these exercises – then on the next page the French slightly adjusted, determined to get it right. Texts move from examinations of beauty and perception to theories about the soul, from passages on English prose style to arguments about the role of women in society. Occasionally a thesis of sorts emerges. In one book, ideas about artistic and spiritual expression taken from Arthur Clutton-Brock are interspersed with

⁹⁷ NLW, NLWMS22279B – NLWMS22286B, Exercise Books, 1903–1933.

reflections on femininity drawn from the work of Italian writer Gina Lombroso, and John moves between them as though attempting to explain her own search for a distinctive visual language. Some notebooks are full of neat, black cursive, each passage announced by a heading and firmly concluded before another text is introduced. Others are written in hurried, impenetrable pencil, the words faded and piled on top of one another, the paper resembling a palimpsest. John could be ordered, rational, and practical with these exercises, and she could be urgent, impassioned, driven by a desire to access the text in the moment through whatever means necessary.

Even when the logic of these texts is elusive, their purpose is clear. In the absence of a more thorough education, copying was a widely practiced pedagogical tool for women, and it could be a transgressive one, as in more formal academic settings women like John would have had limited access to the texts her exercise books explore for fear of what that knowledge might do. Copying opened up an additional step in the act of reading that stressed the lack of distance between reader and text, and for women it created a fantasy space in which these words, or the social and cultural capital they represented, might be their own. For a woman who commanded herself in her diaries to ‘talk as little as possible’, the notebooks are unique, articulating on a grand scale – in a way John’s public pronouncements never would – the interests that resided at the centre of her practice.⁹⁸ The notebooks are documents testament to John’s diligent work ethic, her intensities of attention and devotion, and they are evidence of an intellectual boldness, of a woman passionately engaged in philosophical texts, not merely echoing the tastes of others, but formulating her own canon.

Yet there was more to these exercises, more joy and possession and anarchic pleasure. The exalted figures of Western European thought face each other on opposing pages of her notebook. Reduced to the written word, they start resembling one another, and their distinctions

⁹⁸ NLW, NLWMS22281B, GJ, Exercise Book, 1910–1912, 18 November 1911.

cease to matter. The identities of the writers fade, and individual authorship becomes unimportant. What prevails is John. John steals into a text, takes what she likes, fixes what is valuable in her own hand, discards what bores her, keeping only the brightest shards. She does so again and again, growing bolder through books that chart the years of her life. These slim, unassuming notebooks are repositories of years of deprivation and intellectual curiosity, perseverance and rage.

In the notebooks John occasionally drew a solitary woman alongside her texts. These women are made up of a few spare lines, little colour or detail, opening themselves to the words that surround them, words which visualise their thoughts. The women are fluid, and move limb by limb across the notebooks. The women float and fade, repeat themselves, disappear and re-emerge elsewhere. Their dresses collapse at the hem, their faces scribble over themselves with makeshift veils. Ink flecks elsewhere in the notebooks, lines that start but don't go anywhere: stray bits of hair in a brush, footprints, fragments these women have left behind. The women are encased in frames, so it is likely they were ideas for compositions. Many of her portraits look like this in their simplest form: a woman, arms at her side, a blank wall, eyes fixed straight ahead. The drawings of women were practice, first steps towards future paintings, and they were ideas about John's own becoming. The notebooks were mediums of reinvention, a means of escaping the agony of a single, fixed self: the women in the notebooks were all John, traces of her formulating a succession of alternative identities through a variety of texts which could be abandoned and redrafted once she turned the page. The flexible, disposable, mutable models of self negotiated through the notebooks offer a subtle counterpoint to the representations of the self offered by the rooms and sitters explored in this chapter. Where the paintings embody a certain utopian promise, stressing the unity and serenity of the self, and therefore the ease of solitude, the affect of these notebooks is profoundly ambivalent, at once anguished and ecstatic, replete with anger and passion rather than a steadying sense of contentment. What this suggests, or indeed further emphasises, is the privately reparative function of John's paintings, a quality as important if more

elusive than their experiments with genre and aesthetics. They were space in which the complexities of John's life as a woman could be filtered out, worked through, and a more aspirational model of being could be formulated, tested and realised. In my next chapter, we will see how similar paintings of everyday domestic life might accommodate intimacy and familial drama rather than introspection, and how they might reflect the practicalities of a life given over to others rather than a chosen seclusion.

1.5: Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd, *Still Life with Fan* (c.1920s)

At first she was merely a confusion of names, an inconsistency that asked to be resolved: she was Constance, and she was Miss Lloyd, and she was Mary, and she was Katherine – shadows with a similar shape, an address in common, a hand worn by the same work. Then she was those four strands of herself combined, she was Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd, a figure with a question forever hanging over her, a flash of talent and humour running through the correspondence of others. She was listed perfunctorily amongst the guests at a party or exhibition. She was an extraneous detail in an anecdote. She was an amusing story that Vanessa Bell made reference to in her correspondence with her sister, but the narrative itself – Bell’s original letter – I sought out, but never found.¹ She became her few known paintings: an exquisite nude in fluffy dirtied pastels, a couple of still lifes set in cramped interiors, street scenes of Venice in which women edge along the water in blouses soaked in the same blues. Soon she was an acquisition note in a couple of works by Gwen John: the suggestion of a friendship. Later, she was a handful of letters in a neat script: the network expanded. She never revealed herself to me in a photograph. Instead, Lloyd became all the small details I gathered from what she allowed me to see.

Her taste for salad dressing.² Her poor eyesight, corrected later in life.³ Her Parisian address, 118 rue d’Assass, which was made use of by other women artists in her circle in need of accommodation.⁴ Her driving skills.⁵ Her favourite Rembrandt painting – *The Jewish Bride*.⁶ Her friendship with Gwen John: in thinking of her, John wrote, she could banish any loneliness.⁷ Her friendship with Duncan Grant (it was his recipe for salad dressing she loved). Her interest in

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: 1911-1922*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: Mariner Press, 1978), 470.

² KC, CHA/1/369, MCL to DG.

³ NLW, NLWMS22308D, MCL to GJ, undated (1906–1930).

⁴ NLW, NLWMS21468D, GJ to UT, 28 November 1910. Gwen was hoping Ursula would take Mary’s flat in her absence.

⁵ NLW, NLWMS21468D, GJ to UT, 28 November 1910.

⁶ KC, CHA/1/369, MCL to DG.

⁷ NLW, NLW MS 22300 B, GJ to MCL, draft letter, c.1920–30.

literature.⁸ Her love of Japanese prints.⁹ Her sister, who once travelled to Greece, and Lloyd's envy of that, although she would have her own fun.¹⁰ Lloyd travelled by train alone around Europe, and she was unafraid of haggling for a good rate in a hotel room in a foreign country without any knowledge of the native language.¹¹ Her kindness.¹² The woman she lived with: Miss Ayline Bayley, later her sister-in-law. Her inability to skate, despite her best efforts – picture her gracelessly lurching forward, clinging to the edge of the rink – one reason for her intense dislike of the cold.¹³ At least once, Bell came round for tea. Her evening rituals: drawing classes at the Académie Colarossi between 4.30 and 6.30 p.m., then a short walk home, a quick change of clothes, and after a few moments at the sink, ready to eat dinner at seven. Her work with fabric, for which she designed her own exhibitions mounts. Her wallpaper designs, so esteemed that she was often working to commission.¹⁴ Her sense of humour: Lloyd sent her embroidery and linens to be exhibited at the Chenil Gallery in London, and joked about them being stolen. 'I and Leonardo are so appreciated you see,' she wrote, probing assumed connections between genius, masculinity, medium and the canon.¹⁵ She lived in Paris from the turn of the century through to the twenties; after that she returned to England, and life was different, quieter. Long walks, rooms lit weakly by fire, an ache in her hands once her letters were finished, slipping under heavy bedding before it grew dark. What happened to her practice is unclear. The joke about the possible theft of her work drew its humour both from her uncertain commercial value, and an acknowledgement of how, save for a tiny circle of patrons, recognition had eluded her. According to Ida John's scathing description, she was 'nice & ugly & awkward' – a minor figure, forgettable, wholly unexceptional.¹⁶

⁸ NLW, NLW MS 22300 B, GJ to MCL, draft letter, c.1920–30.

⁹ KC, CHA/1/369, MCL to DG.

¹⁰ KC, CHA/1/369, Letters from MCL to DG.

¹¹ KC, CHA/1/369, MCL to DG.

¹² NLW, NLW MS 22300 B, GJ to MCL, draft letter, c.1920–30.

¹³ KC, CHA/1/369, MCL to DG.

¹⁴ KC, CHA/1/369, Letters from MCL to DG.

¹⁵ KC, CHA/1/369, Letters from MCL to DG.

¹⁶ NLW, NLW MS 22782D, IJ to AJ, December 1906.

One undated still life is typical in situating us inside a middle-class interior, surrounded by the props that make up its presiding social rituals. Colour brightens above the parrot's throat to mark the presence of its voice, but no song will ever sound from it. Middle-class femininity is invested with paralysis, loss of voice, even death, devastating affects which through the taxidermy animal are connected to a form of relentless, immovable visibility. Lloyd never married, but women she knew – Ida John included – had married and stopped painting, and what had been most vivid and alive in them had faded, stiffened. And yet they were never more simply and absolutely visible, more purely decorative and set in their identities, than they were as wives. No wonder Lloyd's preferences tended towards invisibility: ignored proposals, anonymous works, little self-promotion. There was freedom in existing as she did, as a series of charged impressions, connected only to a handful of letters and finished artworks, sometimes as Mary and sometimes as Constance, no husband or acquired surname to place her firmly within an established familial structure, the privacy afforded by living under 'Miss' only compounded with age. I learnt to let her slip away unnoticed.



Figure 12: Mary Katherine Constance Lloyd, *Still Life with Fan*, c.1920, The Charleston Trust.

2: Vanessa Bell's Maternal Aesthetics

The Julian Bell Sketchbook: a Prologue

Before Vanessa Bell painted scores of still life drawn from an everyday life shaped by the particularities of maternal intimacies and embodiment, she chronicled the enormous shift in self heralded by motherhood through a sketchbook devoted to portraiture of her first child. Donald Winnicott describes how in the earliest stages of a child's life the mother is forever making adaptations to the infant's needs, so thoroughly and seamlessly that an illusion arises in which the baby understands itself as continuous with her, her body perceived as 'under the baby's magical control.'¹ In alone depicting her baby and its relationship to his mother, and in adopting formal strategies that convey qualities of the sensations and perceptions that emerge out of that mutual and absolute absorption, Bell's sketchbook constitutes its own theoretical statement on maternal attachment, a document testament to – or indeed, in anticipation of – the experiences theorised by Winnicott. At this moment still life is an impossible genre; nothing else exists but mother and child.

After a long period in service to her 'melancholy, deaf, rather helpless' father, and after resisting marriage in favour of her art for years, Bell accepted a proposal and gave birth to her first child, Julian, in 1908. In the correspondence that came after his birth, Bell describes Julian in a manner uninterested in her child's utility as a symbol of femininity, or as proof of her adherence to gender conventions for conservative family members she was aware were watching. Instead, and without sentiment or ceremony, in her letters she squares him up as a potential subject for composition, readying herself to draw. 'He is very tall and large but not fat and he has tremendously long fingers and toes,' she wrote not long after his birth to her friend Margaret Vaughan.² Focused on anatomy rather than emotion, Bell remained the practical artist thinking through her training in draughtsmanship rather than the doting mother. Indeed, she continued

¹ Donald Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,' in *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 14-15.

² Kings College Cambridge Archive, CHA/1/59/9, Vanessa Bell to Madge Vaughan, undated, (c.1908).

to struggle with adjusting to the restrictions of her new social function as a mother, and seemed to be aware it was femininity itself that she failed to understand, writing to her sister Virginia Woolf (then Stephen), 'I play the part of the proud mother even less well than I did that of the engaged young lady.'³ However, the straightforward, flat affect in Bell's early descriptions of Julian could easily have had other motivations, associated with reticence as much as rebellion. Prior to their marriage, Bell had assumed Clive Bell thought her 'rather stupid and quite illiterate', repeatedly making claims in their correspondence to her own inarticulacy: 'you must know that I can't express myself very well on paper,' she wrote in response to his proposal in 1906.⁴ For years after, Bell's feeling of inadequacy regarding her intelligence would endure, and came to define her relationship with her writer sister in particular. Yet, on the birth of Julian, from examination of the sketchbooks, it seems the hold of these insecurities shifted, or the terms were reversed: it was language, and not Bell herself, which was found lacking. Dismissing the written word, Bell explored the emotional experiences that attended Julian's first few months through a succession of visual representations stored together in a large vellum bound sketchbook now held at The Charleston Trust.

The sketchbook has never received any critical attention because it has spent years inside a private collection only donated to The Charleston Trust in 2007. It is unusual amongst Bell's sketchbooks in solely addressing numerous variations on a single theme: a sentimental subject grounded within family life, one with intense personal relevance to the artist but with little reach beyond that intimate sphere. These images are intent upon observation, record and witness rather than experiment, and are therefore uninterested in their place within a modernist artistic lineage. In other words, Bell was drawing for herself rather than the market or the avant-garde; this too has no doubt had an effect on the lack of critical attention brought to bear on it since 2007. In this respect, the sketchbook shares qualities with Bell's domestic photography albums –

³ Vanessa Bell, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell* ed. Regina Marler (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), 60.

⁴ Kings College Cambridge Archive, CHA/1/59/1. Vanessa Bell to Clive Bell, July 31st 1906.

another medium overlooked because considered overly personal and practiced by women – which are pertinently described by Maggie Humm as ‘repetitive, feminine forms (inasmuch as they are most often constructed by women), not collections of seminal, masculine images.’⁵ The images in Bell’s sketchbook are repetitive, featuring drawings of Julian in the same position with only slight variations, most of which are either fragmentary by design or abandoned only half-finished. These images are always unconcerned with either the explicit formal experimentation that was captivating her male contemporaries, or in the clarity, decisiveness and visual mastery that defined the strategies of the decades before modernism. Instead, these works are preoccupied with presence, affect and intersubjective connection; with wonder, happiness and gratitude. There is a sense in which the sketchbook was begun without any orientation towards a specific outcome; it is structurally open-ended, passive even, guided by the movements and whims of its subject rather than the artist; the different mediums used across the book suggest it has been picked and put down, processes begun, interrupted and arrested, on many different occasions. Although seemingly minor in its ambitions, it veers seamlessly between the monumental (first steps) and the banal (sleeping and waking). The sketchbook’s diverse (indeed, ambitious) address and use is similar to that of the photography album, which Humm describes as embodying ‘social and psychic relations’ – and I will add the related category of the affective to this sphere of intense relationality – ‘as much as formal expressive relations.’⁶

The book is heavy and smooth to touch, larger and better preserved than the other more quotidian sketchbooks (made from cheaper materials) which address domestic objects and the surrounding landscapes. Although resisting sentimental formalities in the intimate publics created by her correspondence – the deliberately pragmatic descriptions of Julian – in private Bell was happy to act with a sense of ceremony. Through the particularities of its texture and form, simply holding the sketchbook has the feel of holding a thing that is alive, delicate,

⁵ Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography and Cinema* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 94.

⁶ *Ibid.*

demanding a special attention. Eliciting maternal affect through both touch and sight, the sketchbook functions as a form of surrogate, a crudely detailed mannequin of Julian himself. Bell creates two orders of contact and commemoration: Julian's physicality is embedded into the materiality of the sketchbook – a means of accessing his body immediately – and his image is inscribed onto each page, encouraging slower, more deliberate contemplation of his form. The suggestive material presence of the sketchbook gives an impression of how it was once used: shared amongst the close network of female friends that came to visit Bell in Julian's first months, it functioned as an additional brokering of intimacy. Claiming a firm link between her new role as a mother and her ongoing sense of herself as an artist, the sketchbook was about feeling and acting out the intersections of two distinct identities.

Smudged lines of charcoal or red chalk are evocative of damp skin, spit, sweet bodily smell, the warmth of swaddling, sleep, the low humming sound of a child in a cot, the soft talk of the mother, the air as it moves around the infant's body as it's carried aloft through a series of rooms. The pressure of Bell's pencil against the paper is slight, careful, aware of its subject's fragility and vulnerability. In her consistent use of soft, smeared lines, Bell conveys a sense of the distinct language, logic and embodied experiences of her baby.

Page after page of large cream paper are marked by the presence of the baby and the empty space of becoming that surrounds him, what Winnicott calls the 'area of illusion' that separates mother and child, and structures the child's first discoveries of agency and self.⁷ Throughout the sketchbook, Julian is depicted floating in opaque, fluid surroundings that both place him back inside the womb and allude to the secluded, tender, nourishing psychic space inhabited by mother and infant. The absorption that comes with this intersubjective state, a state in which the mother is, in Winnicott's description, at once omnipotent and entirely beholden to the needs of the infant, is captured in the close gaze of the sketches, their sole focus upon Julian.

⁷ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 17.



Figure 13: Vanessa Bell, drawing of the artist's son Julian, 1908, CHA/P/621/15, The Charleston Trust.

More relevant even than Winnicott is the world of heightened feeling and intense physical presence evoked by Julia Kristeva in her writing on the 'chora,' outlined in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), and further elaborated on for its significance to maternal experience in the essays "Women's Time" and "Stabat Mater". Borrowed from Plato, the term 'chora' refers to the spatial and temporal state occupied by the infant, a preconscious and rhythmic modality 'previous and necessary to the acquisition of language, but not identical to language,' as Kristeva explains.⁸ Linked to a distinctly female subjectivity, space, and time, the chora is a 'matrix space, nourishing, unnameable, anterior to the One, to God and, consequently, defying metaphysics.'⁹ Access to the chora transforms the available tools of expression, and what Kristeva describes as 'the semiotic' comes into play. Kristeva's argument is that the logocentric (and, by association, androcentric) nature of Western thought has concealed what comes before the word, which is conventionally taken to be the beginning of meaning-making for a subject. Kristeva, in radical

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 29.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', *Signs*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (1981), 14.

contrast to this tradition of thought, and in a theoretical departure that has been much disputed by other feminist theorists,¹⁰ proposes ‘various processes and relations’ that come before sign and syntax.¹¹ The semiotic, as she names this form of consciousness, is composed of ‘rupture, articulations (rhythm),’ she argues; it is the heartbeat, the pulse, movement, gestures.¹² The semiotic is a ‘signifying process based on traces and marks rather than signs,’ as Maria Margaroni clarifies, ‘the marks of the drives on the speaking body, the traces of what Freud calls the primary processes.’¹³ Enabled by this critical apparatus, Kristeva was able to conceive of the maternal anew, and was thus no longer content to rely upon the strictures of the symbolic order to express her experiences of the maternal. Instead, in a polyvocal essay on the philosophical, religious, and psychoanalytical discourses on motherhood, “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva interrupts the main body of text with an explosion of the semiotic, a fragmentary and poetic text that submerges the reader in a ‘chora’ space. ‘Language necessarily surveys from a very high altitude, allusively,’ she writes, ‘words are always too remote, too abstract to capture the subterranean swarm of seconds, insinuating themselves into unimaginable places.’¹⁴ And so words are pulled into the body and clot into haptic, sensual interior environments: ‘the smell of milk, dew-drenched greenery, acid and clear, recall of wind, air, seaweed...’¹⁵ In these fragments of bold type placed onto the margins of the text, Kristeva conveys a phenomenological experience of motherhood that exposes the gaps that mark conventional Western thought – revealing what has previously been concealed or repressed – a thesis that is continually restated by the ongoing strategic juxtaposition of texts, academic and poetic.

For Bell, conveying a quality of maternal consciousness meant abandoning verbal language as such altogether, and there is much about the substance of these drawings – their

¹⁰ For the paradigmatic argument against Kristeva’s theory, see: Judith Butler, ‘The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva,’ *Hypatia*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (1988), 104-118.

¹¹ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 29.

¹² Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 26.

¹³ Maria Margaroni, ‘The Lost Foundation: Kristeva’s Semiotic Chora and Its Ambiguous Legacy,’ *Hypatia*, Vol. 20, No. 1, (2005), 79.

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater’ in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 162.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 171.

reliance on repetition as well as fluid or fragmented forms; their focus on base bodily functions – which corresponds with Kristeva’s theoretical conjectures and their performance within the body of her own texts. The sketchbook addresses the semiotic in as much as it looks unfaltering at the forms and affects that, in Kristeva’s words, ‘connect and orient the body to the mother’ and without recourse to ordinary language.¹⁶ What Bell focuses upon, as though she were still perceiving Julian with the same proprioceptive faculties she experienced when he was in the womb – when he existed to her only as an invisible swirl of physical sensations – is movement. Julian is graphite lines that waver and blur, tracing the slightest shudder of flesh, the expansions and contractions of breath as they move through his chest. Complex data about Julian’s earliest embodiment is synthesised through the spare, almost abstract visual vocabulary of the sketch. At first he is swaddled, but he is far from immobile, the smearing of his outline adding an energy to his form, a visual hint at all the hidden developmental processes that advance even as he appears still. Then he is followed through each cautious attempt at flexing a limb; the incremental curl of his fingers is shown through diagrammatically detailed sketches that show the hand in various poses that differ only slightly from one another; eventually he is crawling, his body all curves and swooping lines; stood up for the first time, he is rendered in watercolour, his sudden opaqueness and brightness acknowledging the significance of this developmental stage. Bodily rhythms of subsistence and growth are suggested in patterning within the structure of the book: through the interplay of textures and aesthetics as well as blank and marked sheets. There are drawings on scraps of paper that do not correspond in size or appearance with the rest of the sketchbook, its smooth passage of large creamy sheets. These scraps diversify scale, and encourage microscopic attention; they are more mobile than anything else in the book, threatening to slip out from the pages. Numerous folds, creases, tears and patches of weathered paper differentiate one sheet from the next. The book traces a movement between different mediums, from pencil to red-

¹⁶ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 27.

chalk to watercolour and back again. In some sheets detail is eschewed in favour of pure form, in others precise creases of a curled finger are set down. Adjustments in scale leave Julian as merely a foot or a hand, while in other sheets the gaze takes in his entire body. Kristeva's describes the semiotic chora as 'no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated,' a dual process that is represented with acuity in Bell's sketches of Julian.¹⁷ Through the interludes of blank paper, Julian emerges only to vanish between one page and the next; some drawings assert particular areas of Julian's form with certainty and strength, only to let other parts of his body go unrepresented. His face is almost always turned, shielding the most private aspects of this nascent building of self. Throughout, Julian is captured in a partial form that could be read as the equivocal process of becoming identified by Kristeva.



Figure 14: Vanessa Bell, drawing of the artist's son Julian, 1908,CHA/P/621/15, The Charleston Trust.

¹⁷ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 28.



Figure 15: Vanessa Bell, drawing of the artist's son Julian, 1908, CHA/P/621/15, The Charleston Trust.

For all the intimacy that Bell's drawings suggest, the 'doting mother' with whom she felt little affiliation remains at a great distance. The works are gestures of love, attempts to record and render important the earliest moments in Julian's life, but they also offer their own kind of precise and unsentimental documentation of the development stages they depict. Given the unfinished and untidy nature of many of the drawings, each following a new gesture or sound or action, they suggest a fleeting moment in time. Their purpose is observation, even theorisation, as though Bell were intent upon formulating her own small, domestic empirical enquiry addressed to infancy. In the early twentieth century, one way of disempowering women was withholding information from them about reproduction, birth and childcare, as this was believed to be either corruptive of their innocence or so naturally embedded into their biological experience of themselves as to not warrant description or help.¹⁸ The subversive charge of Bell watching her child, and figuring out his development for herself through her own terms, her

¹⁸ See: Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England 1945-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

own language and methods, therefore cannot be discounted. Jean Piaget describes the earliest stages of the infant in a manner consistent with Bell's studies, as oriented towards 'sucking and grasping reflexes, crying and vocalization, movements and positions of the arms' as well as 'arms (that) engage in unruly and more or less rhythmical gestures and the head moves laterally.'¹⁹ Rather than have Julian in an unnatural pose, the kind of rigid, formal arrangement that Bell would have been photographed and memorialized through in the century prior, Julian is captured as Piaget and other child psychologists would understand him, in all his soft flesh and spit and sick and grunts and cries and hunger. Julian's complexity as a person moving through the bewildering thicket of earliest infancy is respected and recognized in these works, rather than his status as a fixed symbol of innocence. In other words, Julian was not merely a cipher of what Carol Mavor describes as the Victorian 'cult of the child,' in which representations of the child circulated as 'souvenirs of a time and place that never was – a true Neverland.'²⁰ Julian is not 'prettied up and overdressed,' as Mavor writes of the Victorian child; instead, Bell captures the heightened and sensual state cohabited by mother and baby as they (re)formulate themselves together.²¹

Rivka Galchen flippantly states that 'babies in art mostly look nothing like babies in life,' and it was at least in part to this tradition of unrealistic images that Bell's explorations were addressed.²² The emphasis on the basics of Julian's anatomy stresses the lack of precedent Bell had to work from: there were no obvious models, no language ready at hand. Drawing was a provisional form suited to the thought and experiment required in making a new kind of representation, but it also worked well in conveying the distinct and observable experience of the child himself. Drawing is, as Isabel Seligman argues, 'not only a preparatory or ancillary process, but also an independent one.'²³ In Bell's sketchbook, drawing is used to express an equivalent

¹⁹ Jean Piaget, *The Essential Piaget*, ed. Howard E. Gruber (Maryland: Jason Aronson, 1995), 214.

²⁰ Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, .3.

²² Rivka Galchen, *Little Labours* (New York: New Directions, 2016), 13.

²³ Isabel Seligman, *Lines of Thought: Drawing from Michelangelo to now* (London: Thames and Hudson), 43.

shift in assumed hierarchies: infancy is shown to be a state of attention, attachment and intersubjective discovery that is of interest in its own right, neither as an instance of distorted projection nor as a stage of development significant only because it precedes adulthood, and deserves to be studied as such.

The Work of Mothering

Towards the end of 1920, the artist Dora Carrington (1893-1932) wrote to her lover (the writer Gerard Brenan) a definitive statement on women, art and motherhood. ‘One cannot be a female creator of works of art & have children,’ she wrote, going on to list all the women who inspired her who were childless: “the Bronte sisters, Jane Austen, Sappho, Katy Hester Stanhope, Queen Elizabeth, Berthe Morisot, Le Brun, Julie de Lespernaisse.”²⁴ For Carrington, this statement was partly tied to her uneasy relationship to marriage, heterosexual coupledness and their presumed outputs, how ill-suited those dreams of settling down and reproducing were in the context of her burgeoning queerness. However, it was also true that she had few examples of women successfully combining motherhood and art, or rather motherhood and any kind of work in her middle-class circle. The sheer length as well as the prestige of her list, which is recited with the ease and familiarity of a personal philosophy judged long ago as essential to her survival, were proof enough that this difficulty had a firmly established precedent, and a clear solution: to abstain from the experience altogether. Examples of women who trained at the Slade like Carrington (and briefly Bell herself) were not encouraging: Ida Nettleship (1877-1907) died in childbirth at thirty; Edna Waugh (1879-1979) did not fulfil her enormous potential after giving birth to her two children, and had a serious mental breakdown during their childhood. The morbid associations with motherhood were perhaps why British modernist women artists were reluctant to mother children or, if they did, to explore its experience and implications in their art.

²⁴ Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas Austin, Gerald Brenan Collection 1911-1978, Box 10 Folder 5, Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan, October 1920.

This general trend towards childlessness in women artists has, to a certain extent, been extrapolated into an absolute statement on gender, motherhood, modernism and the possibility of creative work, and one not unlike that articulated by Carrington. Marjorie Perloff, writing about women modernist poets roughly contemporary with Bell, notes: ‘Stein, Djuna Barnes, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Beach, Natalie Barney, Marianne Moore— none of these writers had children; H.D. had one. Loy, by contrast, gave birth four times.’²⁵ Childlessness is here framed as the single most important condition on which a creative life might be built.²⁶ Indeed, in Perloff’s overdetermined and somewhat biologically essentialist account, the chief obstacle in Loy’s thwarted career were her repeated pregnancies and births: even before the social or emotional factors set in, the physical has already and absolutely stymied the new mother, Perloff’s remarks imply. What Perloff’s assessment shares with those made by Bell’s contemporaries is its proposal of a false choice, or a belief in the inevitable inhibitions women faced as artists if they became mothers. Having become a mother in the same decade of her most celebrated avant-garde experiments, the wealth of creative work that arose from these experience present Bell as an exception, or (more compellingly and radically) imply a greater flexibility and reciprocity to these roles than has been previously understood.

In her study of the cultural construction of motherhood, Ann Dally explains that ‘motherhood’ has its first entry in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1597, but merely as a biological fact rather than the consuming domestic ideology it became in the Victorian era.²⁷ In the new century, women were developing tools to resist the most unliveable elements of the feminine ideal propounded by Victorian culture, and motherhood was one such experience that was coming under intense scrutiny. Reshaping motherhood in the first decades of the twentieth century was the changing legal status of women, the rise of reproductive health advice for

²⁵ Marjorie Perloff, ‘The Mina Loy Mysteries: Legend and Language,’ *American Book Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1996), 26.

²⁶ Arguably what also unites the women Perloff lists is their class background and whiteness, qualities which would have ensured that having a child was not the death knell to their art that is implied.

²⁷ Ann Dally, *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal* (London: Burnett, 1982), 2.

women – such as the clinics run by the activist Marie Stopes – the birth of psychoanalysis, the rise in eugenicist discourse, the medicalisation of childbirth that meant a movement from home to hospital, and the increased numbers of women working within the medical profession. For all these contradictory forces swirling around ideas about nature, science, and progress, motherhood remained outside the remit of much modernist cultural production. In understanding why this is, Andrea Liss cites how 'patriarchal discourse had schizophrenically coded pregnancy as that which should not and could not be seen,'²⁸ while Mary O'Brien similarly explains that the 'reproductive process is not a process which male-stream thought finds either ontologically or epistemologically interesting on the biological level.'²⁹ This chapter will be guided by a single intellectually and affectively capacious question: how might a phenomenology of the maternal body and mothering find expression in or be constituted by a work of art, and by still life in particular? I will argue that Bell, in contrast to the silence, selflessness, and sacrificial violence that surrounded how her peers conceived of motherhood, presented it in her art as a means through which to explode received heteropatriarchal ideas about intersubjectivity, sexuality, love, care, and intimacy. Rather than experience motherhood as a block to creative thought, Bell's work stages a version of what Sara Ruddick terms 'maternal thinking,' the transformation of the habits, actions and choices that constitute mothering into its own rigorous 'discipline,' as Ruddick puts it, centred around a form of 'style, commitment, and integrity' which had far reaching aesthetic and political implications.³⁰ Nowhere in Bell's still life is there a definitive statement about what it is to be a mother, either as a biological or social fact; instead I will investigate how her work reveals glimpses of the psychic, embodied and affective lived experiences of an artist exploring motherhood.

²⁸ Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 7.

²⁹ Mary O'Brien, 'The Dialectics of Reproduction' in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Toronto, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2007), 49.

³⁰ Sara Ruddick, 'Maternal Thinking' in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* ed. Andrea O'Reilly (London: Demeter Press, 2007), 96.

Sara Ruddick's frequently reproduced essay on mothering as a form of thought was not universally met with acceptance and acclaim, and the broad principle of scepticism with which bell hooks (and other feminists of colour) approached what they regarded as a 'romanticising of motherhood' which only 'reinforce(d) central tenets of male supremacist ideology' has informed my approach to Bell.³¹ The risk, for hooks, in elevating motherhood as Ruddick does is its consistency with an oppressive biologically essentialist model in which women derive all of their value and meaning from a natural connection between gender and nurturance. While I remain vigilant of that particular theoretical cul-de-sac, more relevant to the study of Bell is what hooks goes on to stress: she emphasises the profound effect of race and class on how motherhood is experienced, and in particular how these factors shape the possible delegation of maternal labour, all of which remains untouched by Ruddick's analysis. As a mother, and as an artist, these considerations are essential in thinking about Bell. 'So accustomed are we to proclaiming the autonomy of the artwork,' Lara Parry writes, or the model of the singular, isolated male artistic genius – what Griselda Pollock calls the 'archaic individualism' of a masculinist art historical discourse – the great sway domestic and social labour had in shaping the career and practice of artists (women artists especially) often goes underexplored.^{32,33} In her experience of motherhood, which was from the start intertwined with a desire to continue a process of professionalisation in her art, Bell benefited enormously from the products of white upper-middle class heteropatriarchal social arrangements, many of which necessarily involved the oppression of other women. Throughout her children's lives, Bell relied upon the cheap labour of servants and nursemaids in the running of her home and in the care of her children. Having inherited at least one of her own servants from her father, Bell's employment of domestic labour had a long precedent within her own family and within upper-middle class households in general. Dorena

³¹ bell hooks, 'Revolutionary Motherhood' in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, 145.

³² Lara Parry, 'The Artist's Household: On Gender and the Division of Artistic and Domestic Labour in Nineteenth-Century London', *Third Text: Social Reproduction and Art*, Vol. 31, No. 1, (2017), 15.

³³ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2003), 16.

Caroli explains that middle and upper-middle class women employed nursemaids so frequently that in the last decade of the nineteenth century there were between 250,000 and 500,000 nannies in the British homes.³⁴ However, these household and their hierarchical arrangements were undergoing change. In the new century, working class women were training to become shop assistants, secretaries, nurses, and teachers, and for many these roles were considerably more attractive than the frequently degrading servility of domestic work. The expanded horizons of working class women meant the contraction of the pool from which white middle class women drew their servants, and many did not welcome these changes, even those who were apparently interested in the liberation politics of the feminist movement.³⁵ At once, new domestic technologies were beginning to streamline the unwieldy tasks normally assigned to female servants.

Implicated by and subtly moved by these developments, Bell was stranded between her inherited traditional values (their complacencies and comfort) and her hopes for a different kind of domesticity. The mythology Bell and her sister constructed of their own coming into being as women exemplified this, and centred around the move from their father's Victorian home in Knightsbridge to their own townhouse in Bloomsbury. 'The promise of the family is preserved through the inheritance of objects,' Sara Ahmed observes, and so for Bell there was no better symbolic rejection of her father's legacy than the sale of furniture from the house in Knightsbridge.³⁶ When narrativizing this part of her life in her memoir, Bell stresses the abandonment of Victorian feminine respectability through the rebellion of small details: the sisters no longer dressed for dinner in formal attire; they drank coffee rather than tea; they spent time with men unchaperoned; they began to speak freely about sex. The behaviours associated with conventional femininity were easily abandoned because they were felt as keenly oppressive

³⁴ Dorena Caroli, *Day Nurseries & Childcare in Europe, 1800–1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 216.

³⁵ For an account of this particular contradiction, see: Alison Light, 'Behind the Green Baize Door,' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 42 No. 5, (5 March 2020).

³⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 46.

to both women, but those embedded within their class position – those which made their creative lives easier, and continued to assure their social status – proved more intractable. Bell was amongst those women who were troubled by the decline of available cheap labour, frequently writing to her sister of her difficulties hiring, discipling and retaining servants. However, Bell was distinct amongst women artists who employed servants in thinking through this social hierarchy and its inevitable forms of emotional dependency in her work, in particular an interior scene from 1912, *Nursey Tea*.³⁷ Throughout this chapter, I will be looking at paintings like *Nursey Tea* that fall within a category that Elliot and Wallace describe as ‘a new fluid working space somewhere between the traditional categories of portraiture, domestic genre, and still life.’³⁸



Figure 16: Vanessa Bell, *Nursey Tea*, 1912, Private Collection.

According to Jane Hamlett, in a typical middle class household the nurse cohabited with children in their own distinct realm: the nursery, often at the very top of the house, was separate

³⁷ Even considering the artists in this thesis, Bell was unusual in admitting to the centrality of servants in her life though her art. Gluck had servants throughout her life, and was infamously demanding and rude with them; none appear in her work, and they are difficult even to identify by name in her personal papers. Ethel Sands lived in a household far larger and more lavish than Bell, and her servants are also near impossible to identify in her correspondence and never appear in her paintings.

³⁸ Bridget Elliot and Jo Ann Wallace, *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)Positionings* (London: Routledge, 1994), 89.

architecturally and therefore emotionally from the floors dedicated to adult rooms.³⁹ Nurses were obligated to engage in tasks that represented the most physically and emotionally taxing of the mothering repertoire, such as bathing, dressing, and feeding. The division was temporal as well as affective and spatial. Each afternoon, children and their nursemaids took a light meal of milk and sandwiches, one of the many daily rituals that placed these subjects inside their own routine. The vastness and privacy of the world children and carers came to inhabit, beholden to their own rhythms and customs, is Bell's subject in *Nursery Tea*. The painting shows two nurses stationed at either end of a table, with the children in their care next to them, the ritual of eating together about to begin, the surroundings and the sitters all rendered in opaque blocks of cheerful pastel hues. The nurse is presented as a universe onto itself, governed by its own complex ecosystem, a unique terrain that deserves sustained attention and description. Bell's point is made literally in the blurring of interior and exterior: the carpet is the vibrant green of freshly mown turf, and the walls are papered with a blue that is subtly marbled by fluffy white clouds. Presented as a distinct landscape, the figures suggest that intersubjective dynamics are distinct to the nurse too. In an evocatively tense arrangement of figures, with their bodies tucked rigidly under the table and only their faces slightly conspiratorially turned, the children and nursemaids are frozen in study of one another. There is no direct physical contact between the figures, each is stranded in a curiously isolated position on their chair, evocative of what Lucy Delap emphasises in her study of early twentieth century nurse and child bonds: how a confusion over emotional and physical boundaries frequently defined these relationships.⁴⁰ No touch or expression of affection, however authentically experienced, was without an accompanying anxiety about the attachment of the child to their nurse, or a premonition of a future in which the nurse would be dismissed in favour of the mother, or simply replaced by

³⁹ Jane Hamlett, *Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class Families in England, 1850 – 1910* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2010), 114.

⁴⁰ Lucy Delap, "'For ever and ever': Child-raising, domestic workers and emotional labour in twentieth century Britain," *Studies in the Maternal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (2011), 3.

another young working class woman. For all its luminous formal sparseness, *Nurse Tea* is no doubt responsive to these complexities, and is everywhere fascinated with the unstable intimacies it records. Rather than simply suggest the nurses' lack of agency, Bell reveals a more subtle grappling for power. The nurses are solid, looming presences that alone construct the work's prevailing mood, that of a charged solemnity. The children, who are presented not as vulnerable, but as subjects with their own wills, look up with haughty pouts expressive of defiance, the girl fixing her gaze upon the nurse with anger, the knife by her hand adding further threat to her stormy expression. Through this tension, Bell makes visible how the claim nursemaids had to any authority was fragile, resting as it did on the emerging class consciousness of the child, which once activated meant internalising society's (or more locally their parents') phobic view of working class subjects, and opening those relationships to an almost unmanageable resentment and violence. The children in Bell's scene have not quite yet reached this state of awareness: the children remain seated; the brightness and cleanliness of the room, as well as the only subtly authoritative pose of the nursemaids is suggestive of a strenuously maintained accord. Bell stresses static forms, tense agreement and silence in *Nursery Tea* so as to linger over with great hope and affection a brief episode in the narrative arc of this set of fraught relationships in which her command, and the control of her satellites maternal figures, is assured.

After The First Post-Impressionist Exhibition opened in 1910, curated by her close friend Roger Fry, Bell became increasingly interested in avant-garde aesthetics on the continent, and *Nurse Tea* is one of her works heavily shaped by this surge of new influences. Drawing on an aesthetic that was itself shaped by Western and Central African sculpture, which had flooded the European market and museums as a result of colonial conquest in the nineteenth century, the faces of the nursemaids are flattened, hard and masklike. This effects a layering of oppressive power relations onto the figures, their difference in class visualised through forms seized from the contemporary visual vocabulary of racial difference. Her back turned, the nurse in the foreground is entirely featureless, and the other nurse is defined only by a sloping line suggestive

of a nose. Inequalities of power shape the different levels of detail in representation: the children have carefully detailed faces, suggesting the erasure of the nurse's faces was motivated by factors other than the merely aesthetic. The literal effacement of the nurse's identities in *Nursey Tea*, whether or not consciously, speaks to the anonymity, disposability and interchangeability of domestic workers in Bell's life – she went through over a dozen female servants between 1904 and 1914 – even those entrusted with a job freighted with such social and cultural meaning as mothering. The time and effort involved in their work, its fatiguing qualities, are not shown or felt in Bell's representation of the women, who are stiff and alert as marionettes. Inconvenient affects, amongst them guilt and sympathy, are removed from the work just as Bell put them out of mind in the conduct of her everyday life.

This was not the first time Bell depicted the servants who helped her with mothering in an impersonal manner. In an earlier work, *Julian Bell and Nanny* (1909), Julian is captured fully in profile; the Nanny is reduced to a chin, as the rest of her face – all the characteristic features that are suggestive of a self – is completely obscured by a large sunhat. If the sunhat were a metaphor or metonym for the self it conceals, then it would be one in which protection and care are emphasised above all, judged more vital and definitive than any personal desires or preferences or physical detail this woman might possess. In *Nursey Tea* and *Julian Bell and Nanny* alike, the subjectivities of the nurses are entirely collapsed into their labour. In identical uniforms that stress the lack of family resemblance between the nurses and the children, and which define them only by their use, who these women are is incidental. In *Nursey Tea*, the loaves of bread resemble the featureless surfaces of their faces, and the milk jug is an echo of the form of the woman in blue, reversing her colours and condensing her shape, a parallel that suggests a shared definition through consumption, exploitation and (again) usefulness. Indeed, in their form and structure, the nannies are lent a family resemblance not with the children but with the surrounding domestic objects. In part, an alliance with the object world was a modernist strategy that treated human subjects as merely arrangements of colour and form, exercises in perception

and aesthetics without the overburdening effect of individual psychologies. To borrow Linda Nochlin's phrase, strikingly in reference to Berthe Morisot's depiction of her own nursemaid, what this modernist technique created were scenes that were 'a kind of human still life.'⁴¹ Yet the use of this particular aesthetic strategy with women over whom Bell had so much power, rarely applying it to her own children to the same extent (unlike Morisot, for instance) remains revealing and unsettling. It suggests that the technique of abstraction and blur when applied to human subjects possesses a stronger affective function than an aesthetic motivation: a means of expressing resentment, alienation, or merely indifference.

Despite (or because of) the close physical and emotional proximity of nursemaids with children, their vital role as affective substitutes to the mother, these women were held at a distance – and, in certain circumstances, dehumanized – by their mistresses. Selina Todd summarises these strategies through the practice of renaming servants to reflect their status, a tactic Delap also emphasises for its alienating qualities, as well as the obligation of servants to be neither seen nor heard while they worked.⁴² For Bell, the aggressiveness of the distortions, the thoroughness with which she renders the women anonymous and unmeaningful, suggests a discomfort in having nursemaids adopt the maternal role on her behalf. Although nursemaids were used widely by middle class women, there remained an ideology of motherhood in which delegating labour meant renouncing the naturalness of the role. Anne Oakley reduces the myth to 'three popular assertions': all women need to be mothers, all mothers need their children, all children need their mothers.⁴³ Working with a belief in 'the singular mother-child bond,' paid help was, in Cameron L. Macdonald's words, only ever considered a 'necessary evil.'⁴⁴ To hire a nursemaid was therefore a status symbol affirming an aspirational class position and a

⁴¹ Linda Nochlin, 'Morisot's The Wet Nurse' in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude (Nashville, TN: Westview Press, 1992), 234.

⁴² Selina Todd, 'Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain 1900-1950,' *Past & Present*, Vol. 203, No.1, (2009), 183.

⁴³ Anne Oakley, *Housewife* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), 186.

⁴⁴ Cameron L MacDonal, 'Manufacturing Motherhood: The Shadow Work of Nannies and Au Pairs,' *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 21, No. 1, (1998), 26.

concession of defeat about your own maternal abilities: a frustrating double bind. The discomfort visible in these representations by Bell was therefore at least partially socially imposed. However, as a mistress to nursemaids, Bell was more conflicted in her position than the average female employer. Anxieties about affection and influence as a mother, which were deeply felt given how much society equated women's reproductive capacity with their social meaning, were only intensified for Bell in vying with concerns about her vocation. Within avant-garde circles and the public consciousness alike, the roles of mother and artist, as Nochlin reminds us, were regarded as mutually exclusive up until the late nineteenth century.⁴⁵ These assumptions remained unchanged in Bell's early twentieth century context, but rather than simply experience these public misconceptions as a restraint to her practice, Bell makes work directly out of the anxiety. A tableau of the affective ties of childhood that is honest about its tensions and compromises, *Nursery Tea* stages Bell's attempt to regard herself as an artist while also building a maternal identity completely at odds with the social norm.

However, to take a reparative approach, the facelessness of the nursemaids might suggest an entirely different attitude, indicative of a more complex angle of representation. As Elliott and Wallace note, the unindividuated appearance of the nursemaids was common to Bell's portraiture of women, all of whom were engaged in intellectual or creative work that was either formally radically or radical in its adoption by women – and often enough both – including her sister, her female family doctor, and the writers Mary Hutchinson and Iris Tree.⁴⁶ The nursemaids are therefore treated no differently than the women with whom Bell was closest, and whom she admired for their radical approach to art and life. In the faceless portrait of her sister, painted in 1912 concurrently with *Nursery Tea*, the distortion of the sitter's face is understood as referring to an essential unreadableness, the otherness even of those with whom one is closest, as well as the limits faced by Bell's chosen medium in capturing the whole flickering presence of

⁴⁵ Nochlin, 'Morisot's Wet Nurse,' 236.

⁴⁶ Elliot and Wallace, *Modernist Impositionings*, 95.

another person inside the apparently definitive statements of a single image. Removing the same measure of detail, Bell lends the nursemaids in her service a similar opaqueness and depth. There were ambitions and desires that were invisible to their employer, this technique suggests. These thoughts and feelings were no doubt obscured by the hierarchical arrangement in place, but they were also inaccessible because of a more basic and universally applicable mystery inherent to other selves.

More radical still, however, following this reparative argument to its conclusion, is the alignment of the nursemaids with artists, and therefore their labour with creative work. For Bell, the maids were not merely interchangeable, instrumental labourers meaningful only in how they enabled her own practice, in the manner their facelessness initially suggested to me. Instead, these were women in command of their own discipline and discourse that enveloped a whole range of emotional skills, practical knowledge and intellectual specialisms, which Bell was interested in exploring in part because it was so other to her own limited vocational experiences and ambitions. Bell regarded Woolf's profession as a writer as wholly alien to her own capabilities, impressive in ways she consistently attempted to articulate in their correspondence, but which perhaps have their fullest expression in the portraits. From the imagery that is consistent across the portraits and *Nurse Tea*, it appears Bell's attitude to her nursemaids shared qualities of her preoccupation with her sister: one of admiration, and of acknowledged difference; the labours of domestic maintenance and literature are thus aligned. Not unlike Ruddick's formulation of 'maternal thinking,' in *Nurse Tea* the nursemaids are presented as generating and circulating a form of maternal-adjacent care as thought, or maternal-adjacent care as art.

Bell's attention to the nursemaids was not an attempt to engage with an existing art historical precedent, to acquire authority or seriousness through association, as they were very few interior scenes that depicted them, further suggesting her interest in them was a more private, deeply felt, and spontaneous product of her everyday life. Diana Wolfhal describes how

in the history of genre painting, the Dutch and Flemish domestic interiors that lay the ground for the focus in Bell's work, it was common to 'disregard the presence of the working-class women in the compositions,' and if they did make an appearance on canvas they were 'shown off to the side, partially cut off by the frame or other figures, situated in the background, or seen from the back.'⁴⁷ Further, if female servants were depicted, they frequently came imbued with a misogynistically didactic message, either decrying the moral fallibility of women or in celebration of a strictly policed and conventionally feminine virtue.⁴⁸ Bell, by contrast, admits to the existence of the nursemaids, placing them at the centre of the scene as key structuring elements, the more strikingly abstract visual language that renders their appearance only drawing further attention to their presence. Further, in so intensely paring back their features, there is no risk of sentimentalising the nursemaids or in making them symbols of prescriptive moral values; instead, the blunt fact of their labour is what is stressed, the simple being and doing that constituted their lived experiences of this role. Bell refuses to obscure the underlying reality of her middle class experience of motherhood and labour. If Bell's work could be said to draw on any tradition, then it is that which is represented by depictions of nursemaids and wet-nurses by women Impressionists such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot. In her discussion of Morisot, Nochlin describes how the painter's 1879 work *The Wet Nurse and Julie* is shaped by the hierarchal relationship between employer and employee. At once, Nochlin suggests, the work is replete with aesthetic strategies which work to level, or at least complicate, the strict social divisions evidenced by that arrangement. 'Two working women confront each other here,' she writes, 'across the body of "their" child and the boundaries of class, both with claims to motherhood and mothering.'⁴⁹ Morisot and Bell both think about motherhood as a set of caregiving practices detachable from particular bodies and biological prerequisites, and which therefore might be

⁴⁷ Diana Wolfhal, 'Foregrounding the Background: Images of Dutch and Flemish Household Servants,' in *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, ed. Sarah Joan Moran, Amanda Pipkin (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), 229.

⁴⁸ For accounts of how this functioned, see: Wayne E. Franits, *The Paragons of Virtue. Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁴⁹ Nochlin, 'Morisot's Wet Nurse', 237.

shared, eliciting negotiations, rules and surprise intimacies between two differently positioned women. As Nochlin observes of Morisot, in making the radical gesture of placing nursemaids within the field of representation, it is not only the image of working woman that is transformed in Bell's work, but also the mother.

The representation of motherhood in art had long drawn upon the iconography of the Renaissance Madonna and child, and the work that surrounded Bell from her adolescence through to her art school education was consistent with this. To draw a necessarily small sample from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Britain: consider Ford Madox Brown's 1851 eroticised contemporary revision to images of the suffering Madonna, *Take Your Son Sir*; or Frederic Leighton's *Mother and Child* from 1865, which frames the maternal bond as a charged, enclosed world of two structured by sensual pleasures; or William Rothenstein's 1903 *Mother and Child* in which the figures are alone, the setting ordinary and domestic, with figure bathed in light from an open window reminiscent of the Annunciation. These representations draw upon the potential of Mariological imagery to reinscribe women as paragons of 'silence, modesty and self-effacement,' to use Marina Warner's phrase.⁵⁰ Images of the Madonna celebrated women in their passivity, docility and obedience, and images of her with her child framed the biological and social necessity of reproduction for women as a form of holy work, adding a sense of divine obligation to the already multitudinous forms of pressure from their social world. The Madonna is a figure of infinite compassion and boundless affection, qualities which in Renaissance painting are conveyed through faces carefully detailed in articulations of love and admiration; their bodies are soft, delicate and structured around the holding of the Christ child. What these religious paintings stress is the degree to which mothering is work, vigilance and effort, but as the role is natural, allocated by divine forces, it should ask for no reward or remuneration. The punishingly contradictory context in which motherhood is both socially devalued as work and

⁵⁰ Marina Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 181.

presented as women's only means of fulfilment arises at least in part from these representations. The continued references to this iconography in twentieth century paintings represented, as Denise Bauer writes, 'relics of an androcentric historical tradition in which maternal subjectivity was invisible and women artists were (are) largely silent and silenced.'⁵¹

However, as the early twentieth century developed, and with the introduction of choice, as Ann Allen explains in her account of the period, there were some representations of motherhood that were part of emerging discourses redescribing the experience as an option rather than a moral duty.⁵² Like Morisot, Bell engaged with the Mariological tradition through updating or secularising the figures.⁵³ As Christopher Reed notes, she completed two six foot square Nativity scenes in roughly the same period as *Nursery Tea*; yet *Nursery Tea* is distinct precisely because it takes motherhood out of the nativity and into the nursery. In *Nursery Tea*, the naturalised, universal and divine image of a world of two is set aside. The scene is about motherhood as a web of social relations rooted in a particular context, responsive to interactions between places of work and domesticities, differing class positions and professional identities, and in presenting it as such, Bell also questions the avowed self-sufficiency of the nuclear family. By emphasising nursemaids, mothering is revealed to be simply another form of work, capable of being performed by other women, and therefore not fraught with the moral pressure of occupying a divine role. In departing from the Mariological imagery in her representation of motherhood, Bell stresses that caretaking is not innate as much as it is learned, an idea which can be extrapolated to suggest that motherhood 'is a historical idea and not a natural fact' as Judith Butler (analysing Simone de Beauvoir) writes of the category of 'woman'.⁵⁴ Lisa Baraitser writes

⁵¹ Denise Bauer, 'Alice Neel's Portraits of Mother Work,' *WSA Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, (2002), 102.

⁵² Ann Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe, 1890–1970: The Maternal Dilemma*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 1.

⁵³ Bell was not alone in playing with the tradition of religious art, and not even in the British context. In France, along with Morisot, examples exist by Suzanne Valadon (18655-1938), such as *Portrait of Marie Coca and her Daughter*, 1913, and by Marie Laurencin (1883-1956) such as *Mother and Child*, 1928. In Britain, and arguably more strikingly, Winifred Nicholson (1893-1981) painted her husband and child, *Ben and Jake Nicholson* (1927), to capture a more equitable world in which mother and father both play a central nurturing role.

⁵⁴ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (1988), 522.

that ‘we could say that what mothers make public are the ways we are collectively and affectively tied to one another,’ and Bell similarly addresses a broader social field of inequities and tensions which is activated by motherhood.⁵⁵

Nurse Tea could hardly be understood as offering a thorough corrective to the phenomenon Bruce Robbins describes in his study of servants in literature in which they only ever appear ‘within a frame that excludes most of her subjectivity, routine, plans, destiny.’⁵⁶ *Nursery Tea* lends the nursemaids a suggestively impenetrable interior life, an intricacy of motive and purpose which is presented as subtly at odds with their service function, but above all it is a record of a working mother’s complicated relationship to the women who enable her career and pursuit of self-knowledge. Delap writes that ‘a simple narrative of exploitation does little to capture the experiences of servants who cared for children,’ a principle which underlies my reading of Bell’s representation of her nursemaids.⁵⁷ Reading a greater nuance into Bell’s representation of the nursemaids would be to reject, along with Selina Todd, the overly simplistic model of ‘deference or defiance’ in the attitudes of servants to their employers, pointing instead to a shifting and uncategorizable swirl of contesting emotions and troubled identifications.⁵⁸ What is conveyed in Bell’s strange, dream-like scene is the mixture of ambivalence and deep connection that defined a relationship bound not by the duty of blood, but by an unstable affective mixture of cross-class kinship, emotional and physical labour and self-conscious borrowings from the language and behaviour of motherhood.

Maternal Embodiment and Abstraction

Given the endurance of the association between heteromascularity and the avant-garde – and by implication, abstraction – rarely are motherhood and radical modernist aesthetics even

⁵⁵ Lisa Baraitser, ‘mothers who make things public,’ *Feminist Review*, Vol. 93, No.1, (2009), 9.

⁵⁶ Bruce Robbins, *The Servant’s Hand: English Fiction from Below*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1986), 3.

⁵⁷ Delap, ‘“For ever and ever”: Child-raising, domestic workers and emotional labour in twentieth century Britain,’ 5.

⁵⁸ Todd, ‘Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain 1900-1950’, 186.

considered together, let alone considered as necessary to one another. However, for Bell, the ‘sensations, moods, sensibilities, intensities, kinetics, tinglings, janglings, emotions, thoughts, perceptions; new coagulations of embodied and relational modes,’ in Baraitser’s electric summary, which came with motherhood inevitably brought her perception of the world, and thus her art, into a different – or a more violent, fluid, unstable, kinetic and intersubjective – state.⁵⁹ Even more explicit in its account of the aesthetic implications of motherhood than Baraitser is Kristeva, to return to her theoretical work, who emphasises how the gestating body is defined through how its ‘cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down.’⁶⁰ Kristeva goes on to describe the maternal body as an engine of abstraction, as ‘a place of splitting’.⁶¹ The abstract idiom Bell adopted after the birth of her first two children corresponds closely with Kristeva’s statement, representing visually what is described as an ecstatic form of splitting and proliferation. Paintings explicitly addressed to motherhood, *The Nativity* (1914) and *Woman and Baby* from the same year are both lost, the latter available only now as a photograph. What this means is that Bell’s major extant treatments of motherhood are indirect, located in her celebrated experiments in abstraction, works which are more concerned with perception and embodiment than with the production of traditional social symbols. Frances Spalding makes the link between abstraction and maternity in her biography of Bell. Discussing her celebrated bathing scene from 1912, *Studland Beach*, Spalding writes, ‘the reduction of form to elemental shapes expresses a feeling which is often austere and remote, but also, I think, related to her maternal experience.’⁶² Spalding goes on to stress that her ‘choice of forms may reflect on her maternal experience’.⁶³ While Spalding does not elaborate on the nature of the connection, and frames it uncertainly in the conditional, it is

⁵⁹ Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 3.

⁶⁰ Kristeva, ‘Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini’ in *French Feminism Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 177.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (London: Harcourt, 1985), 124

⁶³ *Ibid.*

this suggestive affiliation between aesthetics and affect that I hope to explore, and ultimately extend, revealing the heightened sense of interconnection and fracture implicit within maternal embodiment – rather than ‘maternal experience’ in Spalding’s broad terms – as a key force behind Bell’s abstraction. Although the abstract aesthetics Bell was interested in were dedicated to non-referential works, nevertheless, as Brockington also argues, Bell’s works amass complex personal and historical associations connected to motherhood which complicate the theories about the evacuation of emotion from art propounded by the influential men in her life.⁶⁴

Christopher Reed, Grace Brockington and others have all persuasively linked Bell’s brief abstract phase to her production of decorative schemes for the Omega Workshops.⁶⁵ Opened by Roger Fry in the summer of 1913, Omega was a design institution which aimed to bring modernism into the home through making objects of ordinary use. The rigorous simplifications of Bell’s designs for textiles, such as *Maud* (1913) and *White* (1913), were some of the most commercially successful made by Omega, and share many of the formal drives of abstraction. No doubt the figurative conventions of easel painting would have harder to renounce without the practical exercises in non-representational language that work with Omega offered. As Reed points out, the requirement to plot out the design through gridded paper encouraged the movement towards abstraction, as it revealed the fundamentally geometrical structures which underlay the construction of any form.⁶⁶ However, while keeping the shared sensibilities of abstraction and Omega in mind – work which, it must be remembered, Bell was only intermittently committed to and which she was quick to abandon once it became inconvenient to her after the outbreak of war – I will suggest a different, more private and urgent origin for Bell’s interest in abstraction. While recovering from a miscarriage abroad, Bell was prescribed

⁶⁴ Perhaps more so than any other woman artist working at the time, Bell was steeped in the modernist ideology of non-referential artworks. Bell’s husband, Clive Bell, wrote *Art* in 1914; in it, he described the goal of art as the production of ‘aesthetic emotions,’ a realm of thought and feeling detached from everyday emotions responsive only to the machinations of pure colour and form.

⁶⁵ Grace Brockington, ‘In Focus: *Abstract Painting* c.1914 by Vanessa Bell,’ *Tate Research*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/abstract-painting-vanessa-bell/> [accessed 2 March 2020]

⁶⁶ Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 148.

bedrest, a treatment she had endured multiple times already with other associated ailments surrounding menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Fry brought Bell a set of coloured papers to occupy her time, which from her position in bed she then proceeded to cut into ribbons and stick on to a board.⁶⁷ As her body threatened to come apart, Bell found solace in the reparative practice of collaging paper. Gendered experiences of restriction, pain, social coercion, fatigue, nausea, and powerlessness were transformed into an interplay of vibrant colour and form defined by its controllability, precision and care. The negative affects associated with her condition perhaps briefly subsided, and what remained was the salience of Fry's gesture of compassion, the happy distraction the activity provided from the boredom and pain Bell faced, the good use she could make of a body deemed (temporarily if not inherently) ailing, weak and wrong, and the reminder of how art was her primary source of selfhood. When restricted to considerations of colour and form, without the means to render representational detail or narrative, and guided by the ruptures of her maternal body and its needs, Bell began to think seriously about abstraction. Abstraction might therefore be considered one possible product of what Ruddick terms 'maternal thinking'. Maternity creates new thinking around the child, Ruddick argues, while Bell's work suggests that maternity draws greater attention to, and productively heightens, embodied sensations.

Bell's work of pure abstraction from 1914, *Abstract Painting (A Study in Chrome Yellow)* dates from soon after this experience. Composed of oblongs and squares placed horizontally on to a chrome yellow backdrop, the painting evokes the process of observation, selection, arrangement, and cohesion – the coming together of interconnected, distinct parts – that constituted Bell's palliative activity. Unlike so many works of abstraction during this period of modernist experimentation, the canvas is small; it is possible to imagine it resting on Bell's lap as she lay in bed. Directly shaped by the minor, practical artistic activities that were available to her

⁶⁷ Susan Casteras, *Vanessa Bell, 1879-1961: An Exhibition of Her Paintings, Drawings, Designs, Prints, and Book Jackets, September 20-October 28, 1984* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Vassar College Art Gallery, 1984), 9.

after the miscarriage, *Abstract Painting* carries a trace of Bell's maternal body. Through subtle use of texture, tonal nuances and flattened space, Bell animates these shapes, their enlivened presence alluding to suspension, cleavage and movement, processes which are as much about the particulars of art making and imagination as they are evocative of flesh and bodily fluids. Grace Brockington describes the 'central red oblong' as the locus of the work's emotional charge: it 'registers as an arresting, even threatening signal,' Brockington writes, 'partly due to the colour's long association with danger and passion and its widespread use in warning or 'stop' sign.'⁶⁸ The reference made by the oblongs of red, both the smaller orange rectangle at the centre and the intensely pigmented red looming ominously from the left side, might be more specific even than what Brockington's reading suggests. Brockington's identification of red with danger is at least in part rooted in the colour's evocation of blood. 'Red is associated with anger, shame, fear, attraction,' Spike Bucklow writes in his study of the colour, listing affects which are all broadly about blood – as it functions as a metaphor of aliveness, excess, connectivity and desire – and which for some women always bears a relationship to the menstruating body.⁶⁹ Indeed, in particular, Bell's oblongs of red bring to mind blood stains on cotton clothes, marking either menstruation or an issue in pregnancy. What is experienced as an often overwhelming sense of the body as passive, weak and shameful is in Bell's composition transformed into a tidy visual sign which is reassuring in its smallness, orderliness, and fixed materiality. Those negative affects are here transformed into an assurance of Bell's vocation, a thing of beauty to be admired, as visibly public and innately private as the body. These vivid traces of the menstruating body are placed alongside the symbol of an idealised, dainty femininity: the pale pink square in the upper right corner of the frame is the colour of conventional girliness, and resembles a lady's handkerchief or an opened compact of rouge. The pressure implied by the contrast between the red and pink –

⁶⁸ Brockington, 'In Focus: Abstract Painting c.1914 by Vanessa Bell,' *Tate Research*.

⁶⁹ Spike Bucklow, *Red: The Art and Science of Colour* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 1.

unruly embodiment and strictly policed social performance – is only emphasised by the triad of cleansing blue tones, and their hints at anxieties about purity and chastity.

Suggestive of the complex, contradictory social experience of femininity, *Abstract Painting* also evokes the spaces women spent much of their time within on account of these restrictions. Each rectangle resembles the architectural structure of a room, or an opening into a room, a door frame, and the heightened emphasis on the relationship between the shapes in the composition visualises the embodied navigation of space: the vibrant contrasts in colour offer possible visual correlatives for the body's movement, temperature, duration and mood. The apparent opposition between abstract and figurative idiom might in fact simply be a question of scale and detail. *Abstract Painting* can be regarded as a form of interior scene, a satellite view of a drawing room in which all the furniture has been transformed into abstract panels. The shapes bring to mind narrow carpeted corridors, cupboards, doorways, walls, tables seen from above, and floor tiles; the cascade of rectangles from the left side of the compositions resemble a staircase, or the iron railings separating interior from exterior Bell paints in earlier figurative works such as *Apples: 46 Gordon Square* (1909). Indeed, *Abstract Painting* playfully blurs interior and exterior: the chrome yellow is not unlike the burning gold Bell uses to depict the coastline in her 1911 painting *The Bathers*, with the blues reminiscent of the solid blocks of water and sky she uses in the same work, and the pink and reds evocative of bathing huts or towels spread on the sand. The different environments that unfurl from *Abstract Painting* serve as a reminder of how these remedial activities functioned for Bell: for a time, the bed, her body and the coloured paper had to function as an entire world.



Figure 17: Vanessa Bell, *Abstract*, c. 1914, Tate.

Following her experiment with pure abstraction, Bell used an abstract idiom to inflect a number of her subsequent still life. Concerns about the pathologised maternal body and thoughts about how to live with and make art from its particularities remained in the very grain of these works. Consider the ecstatic strangeness of *Still Life on the Corner of a Mantlepiece* (1914), which at first glance looks like it might be another foray into pure abstraction. The influence of the Omega on the visual language of the work is signalled by the presence of an Omega designed paper flower as the central structuring object. The flower cuts across the frame, creating two distinct areas that are further distinguished from one another through contrasting palettes: brighter and lighter to the left and graver tones to the right. Combinations of coloured paper and wool trimmings, Bell described the artificial flowers as ‘much more beautiful than god’s attempts!’⁷⁰ Bell’s comment, although offhand and puckish, sets up *Still Life on the Corner of a Mantlepiece* as an aesthetic environment in which patriarchal power has been deflated and overturned, and nature subverted by the rebellious forces of an alternative matriarchal creator. Close attention to the anarchic pleasure that unites the work’s acidic colour and sharp forms, its mixture of cubist buoyancy and understated dread, radical forms and negative affects, only confirms Bell’s thesis.

⁷⁰ Kings College Cambridge Archive, CHA1/59/4/7, Vanessa Bell to Roger Fry, undated (c.1914).

Forceful and self-possessed, the flower reaches up towards the top of the frame, yellow blossoms emerging from snug cuffs of green like hands from a sleeve. At the centre, a pair of white cylinders are placed upon a slab of fuchsia: from other visual cues, it is clear these objects are ornamental boxes, but Bell's chosen colours and textures, their opaqueness and luminosity, makes them look spectral, as though the paint had been obliterated by an intense heat or light. What is conveyed is a pressure, intensity and threat. The perspective captures the mantelpiece from aslant and below, making the objects appear ominous and oversized. The conventional relationship between figure and ground is collapsed in the flattened space, and everywhere scale is hard to discern: the mantelpiece resembles the helm of a ship charging forward, whereas the stem of the flower is translucent, fragile, like a delicate bone. There are moments where the forms look frail, like they could be flattened by a light breeze, others where their strength is imposing. The forms are hot, fluid and fragmentary; and yet the scene is highly ordered, the shapes and colours fitting together precisely, and every form glowing as though sparkling clean, like everything has been put in its place then gone over with a damp cloth. The right side of the painting is so busy it is hard to tell what is being represented. Is that sinewy gold line another branch? Some green, ochre, and mint are tucked into the corner, but none of it resembles anything familiar. There are only a few stable forms to hold on to, and colour is no help either: it ripples and thins and disappears. A deep aubergine, the colour of the underside of a rock, a colour long undisturbed by light, is so intense the paint still looks wet. As the colour creeps further into the painting the pink disappears, darkening then transforming into a patchwork of blues, as though Bell were tracing the divide between day and night, recording all the hours that typically elapsed for women inside the confines of a single room: when taking care of their children, after a miscarriage, in the final months of pregnancy or in the first weeks after birth. The pink petal at the centre resembles a teardrop, a spoonful of strawberry mousse, an outstretched tongue, a thought taking shape, a length of silk, and perhaps it bears some relation to all of these things – in the way a balloon might be manipulated into different forms – as each

iteration functions as a variation on a theme, a signpost to the body. Description of the visual language of the painting reveal how consistently Bell relies upon an idiom of proliferation, growth, movement, and rupture to evoke fluid embodied sensations, and to generate an ambivalent affective atmosphere in which the erratic easily moves into the ecstatic. Ultimately, many of the psychic and physiological experiences highlighted by Kristeva in her account of maternal embodiment are present in the irregular, abstracted and luminous forms of *Still Life on the Corner of a Mantlepiece*.



Figure 18: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life on the Corner of a Mantlepiece*, 1914, Tate.

In her discussion of how motherhood is figured in de Beauvoir and Kristeva, Zerelli describes both writers' tendencies (despite the vast differences in certain ideological points) to present maternity as 'a powerful distancing effect,' a form of 'defamiliarization' that we might recognise in general in abstraction, and in the details of *Still Life on the Corner of a Mantlepiece* in particular.⁷¹ Another way of thinking about the 'distancing effect' described by Zerelli is as a symptom of boredom, an affect which *Still Life on the Corner of a Mantlepiece* is careful not to

⁷¹ Linda M. G. Zerilli, 'A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity', *Signs*, Vol.18, No.1, (1992), 111.

exclude from its account of maternal embodiment. Rest, inactivity and a lack of intellectual or emotional stimulus were all commonly prescribed for pregnant women of Bell's class, who had herself endured these preventative measures repeatedly by 1914. Abstraction is used to convey a sense of the home's less explicit dramas: traces of distraction, inattention, apathy, fatigue and boredom distort the right side of the composition, leaving in their wake drifting, vague and unreadable forms. Looking at these precisely rendered distortions on the wall behind the mantelpiece, what comes to mind is the shifting wallpaper that marks the descent from boredom into madness experienced by the female narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gillman's 1892 short story "The Yellow Wallpaper". Gilman's narrator is enduring bedrest associated with an unruly postpartum body, a point underlined by her internment inside a room intended as a nurse's: the grave responsibilities of reproduction and parenting are shown in paradoxical coexistence with an infantilisation of women. Bell experienced problems with her mental health that were in some crucial sense connected, if not to her pathologised gendered body, then to the boredom of domestic responsibilities more broadly. Bell once described the most alarming symptoms of her nerves as 'a feeling of unreality which comes on mostly at dinner,' a description which evokes a table groaning under the weight of assembled food, the fussing of the children with the nurses, her husband absorbed in his work, an abiding silence, and Bell left alone with her thoughts, frighteningly free to drift into an elsewhere.⁷² A dissociative state of deep boredom bordering on a complete detachment textures the starkness and violence of *Still Life on the Corner of a Mantelpiece*.

⁷² Kings College Cambridge Archive, CHA/1/59/4/3, Vanessa Bell to Roger Fry, undated.



Figure 19: Vanessa Bell, *Oranges and Lemons*, 1914, Private Collection.

Rendered in spare, acid colours, the representational language used by Bell in *Still Life on the Corner of a Mantelpiece* stresses the scene's unnaturalness. No seed will grow in these flattened and opaque flowers, and no pollination will occur in an environment so sealed off and sterilised. The chain of damaging associations linking nature with reproduction, sexuality, femininity and docility is, through these formal strategies, decisively broken. The same ideologically charged aesthetic decisions shape *Oranges and Lemon*, a still life from the same year. With their outsized, antagonistic forms and radioactive colour, there is nothing sweet about these fruits. The lemons are lacquered with turquoise – an electric blue not found in nature – and ooze with a lurid sourness conveyed in a harsh chrome yellow. The oranges are small, brittle dark balls that hardly resemble oranges at all, little more than desiccated husks. Nor is there any comfort to be found in the elliptically described domestic space the work situates the viewer inside. From the brash and incoherent pattern on the wall, the tightly orchestrated splinters of dazzling brightness that are vibrating and slashing into one other, Bell positions the home not as a space of compassion, but of conflict and experiment. The messiness, the chaos, the violent contrasts in colour, the mixture of visual languages, together it constitutes is a work of ugliness, wilful unnaturalness, and brazen pleasure. In refusing to align nature with passivity, fertility or beauty, and instead

using representation as an occasion for subversion, Bell radically revises a prevailing symbol of femininity. Through these distinct but connected examples of abstraction, Bell invests female embodiment with experiences of desolation, violence, and self-sufficiency. Expanded to include these affects, the maternal might be considered in more ruthless, destructive and unpredictable terms than the standard social model allowed.

Bell's domestic scenes frame motherhood as a potentially invigorating experience of discomfort, a sensation of deep otherness and heightened presence, a means of seeing one's oppression clearly and seeing beyond it, utopian ideas about ambivalence and its possible use which anticipate Nina Power's recent work on queer maternity. Power describes an impulse in contemporary French motherhood memoirs in which women question their role as mothers, even refuse their role as mothers, all the while investing it with violence, disappointment and subversion, and all from the position of already having had children.⁷³ Power goes on to clarify this state as:

‘a kind of ‘queer maternity’, which would be less a celebration of non-heterosexual (that is, a celebration of ‘queer mothers’ or ‘queer motherhood’), than an attempt to think about what it might mean to refuse motherhood from the position of already being a mother⁷⁴

Power's desire to invest motherhood with queer potential is born out of the implicit dismissal of the connection by Lee Edelman, via his rejection of the child as a political figure and the engine of that ideological construct, reproductive futurism. In Edelman's formulation, heterosexual reproduction is a redemptive promise about one's meaning and worth as a subject, and it is an absolute privilege afforded only to those with appropriate desires, and through channelling so much collective affect and energy into what is fashioned as the superlative moral responsibility of one's life, it is a means of denying the possibility of queer resistance to prevailing social relations.⁷⁵ The queer man is his chosen oppositional resource, a figure capable

⁷³ Nina Power, ‘Motherhood in France: Towards a Queer Maternity?’, *Paragraph*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (2012), 254.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

of troubling these compulsory aspirations. Power, however, argues that this vision of resistance removes women and maternity entirely from the frame, and attempts to expand the notion of queerness to fit those already irrevocably caught up in heterosexuality's logic and mechanisms, who want a radical revision to the social order which acknowledges and includes them within its struggle.⁷⁶ 'Rather than an oppositional perspective of the queer undoing the straight,' Power writes, 'you have a nominal 'straight' figure behaving in a queer way by questioning the centrality of the very category that defines her – namely, motherhood.'⁷⁷ Some might object to Power's defanging of 'queer' in its use as a synonym for 'oppositional', or indeed as is the case in the memoirs she explores (most of which simply state the ambivalence of motherhood as an experience, or attempt to temper its glorification within society) perhaps merely 'unconventional'. Yet Power's argument might strike others as unnecessary or derivative given the strong link between queerness, motherhood and refusal established through the work of Adrienne Rich; in particular, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, which forcefully theorises the position Power teases out of her selection of memoirs, and decades before. Rich is intent upon separating the patriarchal institution and its coercive power over motherhood from the actual lived experiences of women with children, and connects this struggle to those which define queer social relations. Rich writes: 'The history of institutionalized motherhood and of institutionalized heterosexual relations [...] converge [...] Both create the prescriptions and the conditions in which choices are made or blocked.'⁷⁸ Queer motherhood, for Rich and Power alike, might be conceptualised as a reinvention of the available choices and their prescribed outcomes, a way of making affective opportunities and unexpected pleasures out of apparently absolute blockages. Looking across the artwork that Bell made while coming to

⁷⁶ Maggie Nelson argues something similar about the erasures of Edelman's work in her theoretical exposition/memoir, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis MIN: Graywolf Press, 2015); however, Nelson is working with a model of queer maternity in which 'queer' is not simply used to mean 'oppositional' (as Power perhaps rather controversially uses the term) but her own and her partner's queer sexual and gender identities.

⁷⁷ Power, 'Motherhood in France: Towards a Queer Maternity?', 256.

⁷⁸ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976), 45.

terms with her new status as a mother, it seems that if she was not explicitly thinking through a queer iteration of this social form, radically revising the emotional and labour relations at its core, she was at least, as Rich urged women to consider, attempting to question some of motherhood's tenets, to speculate on what it might look like outside of the dictates of heterosexuality.

For evidence of this, one might look not only to the fierce works of abstraction, but also to a striking painting in which Clive Bell appears alongside his children from 1924. Clive is posed as the traditional man of the manor, in heavy tweed with a haughty demeanour, his hair thinning, his eyes blank and toad-like. Children surround him, attendants to his throne, and land rises behind them. The arrangement alludes to eighteenth-century family portraiture, a form contrived to convey a sense of the subject's power and wealth, always more interested in inflations of the sitter's ego than realism. Clive has dominion, but over a disquieting simulacrum of the pastoral idyll: it is flat and out of proportion, like a single adhesive material that could be peeled off the surface entire, or swept off like a stage backcloth. The sitters are as strange as their surroundings: Clive's putty face, the dark expression of his son, and the cartoonishly rendered girl. Whether or not intentionally, the work speaks to the impossible theatre and grotesque fantasy of both the couple and its desired by-product: the family. Partly the painting is so unsettling because it is poorly executed, amateurish, neither a close enough copy of a historical form nor a recognisable revision. Yet the badness of the work might bear a relationship to the idea it represents, indicating an incompatibility between the idyll it aspires to and the reality of the form: the notion that Clive, as a father, occupied an authoritative position, emotionally or otherwise, in relation to his children. The work telegraphs a mischievous queerness.

The still life compositions in which nature is stripped of its given associations, and maternal embodiment and subjectivity are invested with a number of jarring contrasts and evocative tensions, ultimately constitute their own questioning of the experiences they record. Even the relative absence of direct, concrete references to motherhood in her still life reflects

something of Bell's desire to think about and enter these experiences aslant. *Still Life on the Corner of a Mantlepiece* and *Oranges and Lemons* both challenge the naturalness, sweetness, sentimentality, and simplicity invested in a domestic set up in which motherhood was considered its stable emotional centre. Bell celebrates the subversive potential of a seemingly restrictive, gendered genre for redescribing motherhood, revealing it to give rise a visual language accommodating of greater intensities, and broader varieties of experience.

After Motherhood: Bell's modest paintings

In her recent reassessment of Bell, Grace Brockington argues that 'the problem of late Bell, the consensus that it is boring, is hard to discount.'⁷⁹ Although she does not specify still life, no doubt the scores of faithfully figurative works Bell made of her daily life from the twenties to the late fifties are those 'boring' pieces to which Brockington refers. However, what might be considered interesting about these pieces, so often ignored or dismissed as Brockington states, is Bell's continued, seemingly inexhaustible and vigorous attention to scenes which for most others are unremarkable, not only unable to hold their interest, but powerfully repellent of any thought or attention. Unlike Brockington, who understandably leaves Bell's late work stranded with a definitive negative judgement of its value, in what follows I will pick up this collection of minor paintings, and ask what Bell's ability to remain interested meant. 'Everything depends on what, if anything, we find interesting,' Adam Phillips begins his recent study on attention, and perhaps Bell's late work could be considered more fruitfully if this dependence and its stakes were more sincerely attended to.⁸⁰ Indeed, the proliferation of still life works that defined this moment in her oeuvre ask a version of a question posed by Sara Ahmed: 'what difference does it make "what" we are orientated toward?'⁸¹.

⁷⁹ Grace Brockington, 'A Lavender Talent or the Most Important Woman Painter in Europe? Reassessing Vanessa Bell,' *Art History*, Vol. 36, No.1, (2013), 128.

⁸⁰ Adam Phillips, *Attention Seeking* (London: Penguin, 2019), 1.

⁸¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 1.

Bell's late work repeatedly dwells over and rearranges domestic objects: jugs, tea-trays, lemons, plums, oranges, decanters, apples, tea-towels, cups, bowls, finely decorated crockery. Some of these paintings were sold to galleries or private collectors. Many remained unfinished, rolled into drawers never to be retrieved, or they were painted over, or they were completed to Bell's satisfaction and simply stored amongst other household goods, as indifferently catalogued in cupboards as old china, and now constitute a small part of the archive collection at the Charleston Trust. Although the works themselves all broadly resemble one another, rendered in a relaxed figurative visual idiom in warm tones, there is an immense inclusivity to the work, enveloping a huge variety of flowers and foodstuffs. With a hyper alert consciousness to the smallest details, each work is (re)arranged, fixed in place, plainly observed and recorded. Despite ample opportunities for stylistic or perceptual adjustments, the scenes are without distortion or comment. Such interventions are unnecessary: there is already so much to touch, play with, deliberate over, find a suitable partnering object for – harmonising colours, textures, and shape – position and reposition. The apples are there, laid across a stretch of fabric, or they are not there, the day and the hour has changed, and instead there are eggs, and that passage of time and its accompanying substitution are enough to merit detailed record. Without differences in style, composition or size, it is mere presence, or what is added or subtracted from the arrangement itself which becomes meaningful.



Figure 20 & 21: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life of a Vase and Vegetables*, undated (c. 1928 – 1939) National Trust, Monks House; *Still Life with Decanter*, 1941, National Museum Wales, Cardiff.



Figure 22 & 23: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life*, 1933, Cartwright Hall Art Gallery; *Still Life with Pears and Everlasting Flowers*, 1945, The Charleston Trust.



Figure 24 & 25: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life with Apples* and *Still Life with Oranges and Lemons*, undated, The Charleston Trust.

Looking across a series of these works at the Charleston Trust feels like playing the memory game in which objects are placed on a tray then removed one by one. The game is about recall and attention, about concentrating on objects ordinarily overlooked, on overcoming

the impulse to look without seeing. The game, like still life, turns on our blindness to our most familiar contexts. The game subtracts in order to bring the sum total into focus, and this is Bell's still life painting too, concentrating on a corner of a room to encourage scrutiny of the entire house. Bell's still life do not take the eye elsewhere – into a historical or religious narrative, or into the identity of someone else – they open it, wherever the viewer is stood, and sharpen its vision. The countless finished and unfinished still life paintings that Bell completed from the late twenties until the end of her life are about this illumination of the given context, and its form of selective, amplified attention. Although we are prone to 'take our interests for granted,' as Phillips notes, the fact remains that 'only particular people, images, things, patterns, rhythms and words affect us,' he writes.⁸² In an earlier essay on interest, Phillips rephrases the same idea, suggestively asking the reader to consider 'the objects of interest as clues, as commas that look like full stops.'⁸³ Bell's scores of works addressing food and flowers not only record her discovery and involvement with what interested her, but represent an attempt at visualising the ways she inhabited and displayed those habits. Paintings like *Still Life with a Vase and Vegetables* and *Still Life with Decanter* communicate Bell's interest in a number of aesthetic and everyday activities. In growing her own produce in the gardens at Charleston; in planning menus for dinner parties and entertaining guests with dishes selected by Bell and made by her cook; in the domestic art of harmonising different textures, colours, patterns and three dimensional forms – through a mixture of shopping and decorative placement not unlike curation – and all according to an easy-going interpretation of a Post-Impressionist aesthetic.

Following Phillips, it is possible to look at the flower paintings by Bell, for instance, as 'commas,' or a moment of punctuation or pause within a much longer creative process. In many of these paintings, Bell holds back more avant-garde techniques: the flowers are represented with a plain figurative idiom, frontal compositions, at a distance roughly in line with the reach of the

⁸² Phillips, *Attention Seeking*, 4.

⁸³ Adam Phillips, 'On Interest,' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 18, No. 12, (20 June 1996).

painter – the possible adjustments and movement in this perspective adding a certain energy to the otherwise still compositions – with complementary palettes and an evenness of light. They are in artless arrangements suggestive of haste, and are placed in a range of jugs, vases and glasses set down on tables and ledges, often in corners, or with a crop that removes the rest of the room. As such, it is the flowers that command all the attention, their simple presence stating that they are interesting enough in themselves. Underneath their deceptively simple appearance, however, diverse activities bustle. The paintings functioned as a form of work log, recording the activities Bell engaged in with the garden: she researched flowers, and if her correspondence is to be believed, she selected and planted seeds, and designed the layout of the garden, shared with Duncan Grant and done with the enthusiasm of an Omega decorative scheme. Bell did some minor maintenance in the garden, pruning flowers and digging up potatoes,⁸⁴ chores that carried less of a charge in terms of her femininity and class, and which she therefore performed more often than any other form of household maintenance.⁸⁵ Gardening was a private mode of creative production that demanded rigorous, innovative thought and action. Gardening yielded immediate, tangible results without ever demanding a clean, finished product, enabling a loose, capacious and ongoing form of art-making which contrasted the commercial and social pressures – the need to please the avant-garde elements of her peer group as well as the market – Bell encountered when working on canvas. The sustained effort, specialist knowledge and attention involved in these activities, an engagement with the biological existence of flowers as well as the aesthetic norms of garden design, thrums underneath each one of these works. Many of the flowers works are lent the dignity of portraiture, and revel in blurring the distinction between human and nonhuman. Typical is *Flowers in a Ginger Jar* in which the subtle abstract backdrop closely resembles those Bell painted into portraits of her women friends. Aligning her friends

⁸⁴ Tate Archive, TGA 20078/1/44/67 and TGA 20078/1/44/70: Vanessa Bell to Duncan Grant, c.1917.

⁸⁵ For an account of the rise of the woman gardener, and its coherence with Victorian ideals of middle class femininity see: Sarah Bilston, 'Queens of the Garden: Victorian Women Gardeners and the Rise of the Gardening Advice Text', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 36, No.1, (2008), 1-19.

with flowers, Bell fills these paintings with aliveness, intimacy and emotion, and as in the portraits of her friends, the use of abstraction is as much about familiarity as artistry, laying claim to an inherently modernist quality to the flowers and gardening themselves.

From her immersion in horticultural discourses, Bell was exposed to the association flowers have long carried in relation to female sexuality. Flowers symbolise an ornamental, idealised femininity as much as they warn against a formidable, exoticized (and frequently racially othered) sensuality.⁸⁶ Dissatisfied with this binary, Bell's flower paintings create a third term. Bell's chosen textures, colours, use of perspective and simple environments neither elevate or exoticize the plants under inspection. Nowhere are there the enlarged, fuchsia stamen or dainty pastel coloured petals that constitute the floral feminine. Bell's flowers are presented with a bulky texture and opaque colour that makes them appear solidly alive, almost muscled in appearance, bursting with vitality. Bell's flowers are about documenting and theorizing how her experiments in the garden intersected with her experiments in aesthetics. Tracking how colour was an action of sunlight and soil as well as paint; observing how movement might be about pruning crouched by the beds and paring back forms on the canvas. If these works transmit any meaning about gender, then it is an aligning of femininity with activity and skill, innovation and perseverance. Which is to say that Bell's flowers are replete with precisely the things that femininity is often deprived of in the realm of the symbolic.

The phenomenological philosophical tradition, as discussed in the previous chapter, understands consciousness not as directed towards itself, but as guided by the presence of objects in its view. To paraphrase Sara Ahmed, we are turned towards things, which then make an impression on us. In other words, objects shape the self; they create the horizon towards and through which our entire lives unfold. Therefore, what Bell inadvertently showcases through

⁸⁶ See: Caroline Jackson-Houlston, "'Queen Lilies'? The Interpenetration of Scientific, Religious and Gender Discourses in Victorian Representations of Plants', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 11, No.1, (2006), 84-110.

these still life, much like Gwen John, is a process of self-formation. It is because of the resonance of everyday objects in the production of a self that Ahmed describes how she wants to see the basic domestic things that made up the study of Edmund Husserl, who wrote some of the foundational texts of phenomenology. Ahmed then imagines Husserl's study, and in doing so stresses the frictionlessness of the space, the dominance of the table on which his writing occurred, and around which each thing is in some crucial sense responsive to his vocation. Ahmed goes on to describe how the presence or absence of objects is reliant upon conditions that are shaped by gender, race and class: Husserl's subject position as a white middle class man was what allowed him this clear, uncompromised orientation towards the reading and writing materials in his study. For the purpose of thinking about Bell, Ahmed's remarks on Adrienne Rich are pertinent. Discussing Rich's inability to work while her children were young, Ahmed writes:

'For some, having time for writing, which means time to face the objects upon which writing happens, becomes an orientation that is not available given the ongoing labour of other attachments.'⁸⁷

Time to face the objects through which painting happens, to use Ahmed's awkward but evocative phrasing, was what Bell struggled to negotiate for years: educating her children, caring for them, at times eating with them, entertaining them and managing the nursemaids that did the bulk of the more menial work had made an uncomplicated orientation towards her own practice impossible. Regardless of the help she had, Bell was still bound to her children in ways their father was not, and called upon to tend to their needs in consuming spells of mothering which her childless friends observed in others with muted horror.⁸⁸ By the time she was painting these late still life, however, her children were either grown up or in full time education outside of the home. Newly unencumbered by those attachments, Bell revels in this freedom, and treats

⁸⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 32.

⁸⁸ See p. 166 of this thesis: 'I think it would be nicer for her to do other things,' Gwen John wrote to Ursula Tyrwhitt, on hearing that their friend, the artist Edna Waugh was unwell, unhappy, and having another baby.

attention, time and the simplification of the process of making art itself as the focus of her work, dwelling over her ability to paint with an alertness and pleasure. What these still life represent and embody is a phenomenology of *after-mothering*, a phrase whose very awkwardness illustrates how little this experience is explored. Given that mothering is socially and culturally invested with so much meaning and worth, and given that for women of Bell's time it was the coordinate around which so much of their lives and identities turned, what happens (how does it feel, where does one turn, what objects come into view) once the activities definitive of that role cease to fill the days?

After years considering the needs and desires of others above her own, what the experience of *after-mothering* entails for the mother is a sudden, dazzling reorientation towards the self. The mother comes to understand herself anew, divested of the overdetermining ideological trappings of the maternal role. The once contracted world expands, and encourages a flourishing in and of the mother. In Bell's case this meant time to garden, read, think, attend exhibitions and make art. As it shaped her artistic practice, this shift in experience is clear in Bell's work: her still life from this period reveal an aesthetics of self-serving pleasure, delighting in bright, pleasing colours, familiar subjects and simple compositions infinitely adjusted and recombined, and without concern for modernist experiment, artistic growth or market success. These still life are awkward, unconsidered, and in places poorly executed without being self-consciously deskilled in the manner of certain modernist strategies. They are crammed with extraneous materials and details. They do not correct their mistakes in perspective, and they are formed from what is at hand, both in terms of subjects and materials: colours look inexpertly mixed, either weirdly fluorescent or ill-matched for their subject; canvases are small, and given their poor quality, presumably cheap. These works are largely unchanging in their tonal or affective register: all of them are quietly contented, registering the richness, abundance and beauty of an everyday domestic setting. They therefore do not make any demands on the viewer, who can discern their meaning and access their store of experiences at a glance. They risk a certain middle-class

smugness in how frictionless their world appears, a quality which is tempered by the rough, clumsy handling of the scenes, as well as the rustic textiles and simple foodstuffs. They are without moral messages. They remain silent on the prevailing psychoanalytically inflected modernist themes of violence, death or desire; they are more or less mute. They are never remarks on the condition of painting itself, nor are they interested in engaging with the belief in figurative representation as an impediment to creative self-expression, or with mimesis as the traditional goal of artistic practice. Despite the private domestic world to which the works offer entry, they remain curiously impersonal. Partly this is because of their mediocrity: removed from their context, the paintings in the archive at The Charleston Trust in particular could easily be the work of an unknown amateur. Curiously contentless, repetitive and uneven, nevertheless there is something captivating about these works that defies attempts at description or paraphrase. How their surface plainness yields to an exceptional doggedness of attention; how solid, bountiful and coherent is each scene, and with each distinct from one another, suggestive of an inexhaustible subject matter, energy and paint. How absolute their departure is from what was considered good or exciting art at the time, and how independent their vision is given that cultural context. Reductively teleological readings of Bell's career contrast the vivid successes of her earliest abstract work with the apparent failures of the late work, but these accounts arguably misunderstand Bell's intentions, or what she wanted from her art. Despite Bell's interest in professionalisation, she was from the twenties onwards less concerned with the self-commodification demanded by creating a signature style or committing herself to contemporary avant-gardes than she was with an observation of how art and everyday domestic life might fruitfully coexist. In other words, Bell was now painting for herself alone, and that pleasure is smeared across the work with a startling intensity.

Working in a loosely figurative idiom tethered to a mimetic tradition while remaining unconcerned with precise renderings of perspective, light, texture or colour, Bell's defiantly insular and unoriginal works also constitute a deflation of the ideals and ambitions of the

masculine modernist project. The innovative aesthetics that were prized above all else by the male painters in Bell's life, as well as their glorification of the advances to figuration found in Italian Renaissance painting – that is, both the avant-garde and more traditional camps – were quite simply ignored. Both invention and imitation were far from Bell's mind. Arguably, to have a stake in either experimental aesthetics or tradition is to imagine one's work, identity and career as occupying a prominent place – indeed it is to expect oneself simply to *matter* – within the broader scheme or sweep of art history. Aware of her exclusion from such histories, and witness to her perceived irrelevance through her lack of admiring press coverage, commissions or solo shows, women like Bell had no reason to invest in the promise of experimental aesthetics.⁸⁹ Why not just settle into a particular aesthetic groove, regardless of how unfashionable it was, and take what pleasure you could from your art? Although Bell's return to a realist idiom has been linked to general trends across British art after the First World War, those for whom abstraction was painfully reminiscent of the disorder of warfare, much of this figurative revival remained fixated on its own status as an art object with a possible cultural legacy and broader social meaning. Artists worked with monumental, didactic scenes drawn from biblical sources replete with remarks on the human condition (Stanley Spenser) or they worked with a nostalgic desire to draw together what they regarded as the fragmented parts of British local rural cultures (John Piper). Working with small, immediate, personal forms, of which only some were even shown to the public, Bell could not be said to have been using the figurative idiom to similar ends. Instead, what Bell made were examples of what Mira Schor calls 'modest painting,' work which 'does not aspire to historical importance through physical domination of the viewer or the room in which it is placed via monumentality of size' and which has a preference for 'understatement and reticence' and 'expressive reserve.'⁹⁰ Schor describes how this kind of small, unapologetically

⁸⁹ Consider the case, for instance, of the women Vorticists, Helen Saunders (1885-1963) and Jessica Dismorr (1885-1939), neither of whom gained a place within the modernist canon despite their close adherence to avant-garde principles and the movement's key players.

⁹⁰ Mira Schor, 'Modest Painting' in *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics and Daily Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 136.

unimportant painting refuses to heed standard cultural ideas about progress, giving itself over to more private, pressing drives in the creation of works freighted with quiet ambition and subtle feeling.



Figure 26 & 27: Vanessa Bell, *Flowers in a Ginger Jar*, 1931, Ulster Museum; *Zinnias*, 1943, Usher Gallery.



Figure 28 & 29: Vanessa Bell, *Still Life*, undated, The Charleston Trust.

Bell's modest painting is concerned with the affirmation of ordinary life, and the sheer difference amongst such apparently uniform subject matter illustrates, as Liesl Olson says of modernist renderings of dailiness, how 'no event is the same event, even if it appears everyday.'⁹¹ Olson describes how the modernist novel, including those written by Bell's sister, attempted to show a range of affective experiences, giving as much attention to heightened moments of self-consciousness as the mundane moments that occupy our lives. Repetition of everyday actions is what we use to locate ourselves within our own lives, to shape their very drift, and Bell's still life visualise these daily practices, the sameness that undergirded her routines. The difference in finish across the still life, ranging from the exquisitely detailed and explicitly laboured over to the hurried and spontaneous, reflect the everyday ebb and flow of months spent engaged in a fixed routine. Flowers come to stand in for a variety of everyday elements and domestic functions: through them glimmer different affective states, thoughts, behaviours, and histories. In an undated and untitled painting in The Charleston Archive, the support is a rough and uneven canvas, its edges suggestively frayed; the paint has been applied lightly and flatly, the board still visible beneath, and little is done to distinguish figure from ground. The yellow, red and lilac blossoms are rendered without tonal subtleties in soft pastel colours that make the bouquet look painted directly onto the salmon pink wall behind. The mood is light and cheerful, with various signposts to haste and excitement, impromptu creation and its many pleasures. By contrast, and despite their compositional similarities, *Zinnias* is rendered in deeper tones, with attempts made at shadow and three dimensional perspective. Charged and deeply felt experience is implied in *Zinnias*, with its dramatic, polished aesthetic suggesting contemplation, intense involvement and perhaps even a meditation over the symbolism of its subjects: zinnias, in the Victorian language of flowers, encourage reflection on absent friends. What the large number of canvases dedicated to ordinary experience and their studied contrasts suggest is the control Bell exercised over her

⁹¹ Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.

everyday life. However, Olson rightly points out that ‘class necessarily determines just what sort of ordinary tasks mark one’s life,’ and this is a noticeable feature of Bell’s still life: it is the very absence of pressing domestic tasks, or the necessities of wage labour, which allowed Bell to remain so unwaveringly focused on this vast, ongoing project in genre.⁹²

In the archive at The Charleston Trust, surrounded by representations of apples, oranges and bouquets, questions emerge similar to those posed by poet and theorist Anne Boyer in her lyric essay ‘A Woman Shopping.’ Discussing shopping as a practice that has been dismissed as trivial because of its association with marginalised subjects, women and domestic workers, Boyer considers Gertrude Stein’s 1914 poetic still life ‘Tender Buttons’, asking: ‘and from where did that mutton, that roast beef, that carafe come?’⁹³ Stood before a canvas of apples, certain questions arise: who went to the market with the instruction in hand, who rinsed the apples in the sink, who placed them in china (recently polished), who baked them into a pie (not for their own consumption), who washed the dishes afterwards, who brushed the crumbs from the floor, who disposed with all the waste; who (by hand) removed from clothes any stains left by the fruit, who then hung up those clothes one by one, and ironed them once dry? In the spaces between artworks, these relations are at times briefly revealed. In Bell’s sketchbook, between biro still-life studies and heads on their way to portraiture, a sheet of paper is hastily inscribed with the words *Please do not TOUCH*: a message to her servants, who, in her eyes, could not be trusted to distinguish between art and life, real mess and its creative equivalent. The fear in this command is partly about inconvenience, but perhaps more vividly about contamination, hence the exaggerated emphasis on touch: for a servant to touch the apples would be to undo their transformation into a different order of object, reversing what was on its way to transcendence back to the merely banal.

⁹² Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 77.

⁹³ Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women* (London, Berlin: Mute, 2016), 48.



Figure 30: Vanessa Bell, Sketchbook sheet, undated, CHA/P/315/18, The Charleston Trust.

A 1943 painting of Grace Higgins, Bell's longest serving cook, discloses a similarly unself-conscious jumble of detachment, anxiety and delusion about her staff. Higgins is in the kitchen, the table laid with vegetables she will go on to wash, chop and prepare. Hours of work are ahead of her, but none of the difficulties of those impending tasks are evident, or even hinted at: the surfaces are clean, the crockery unused, her apron and dishcloth unsullied, her unmarked hands hovering over an apparently empty mixing bowl. A stack of cooking pots gleam behind her, a skeleton of metal that mimics her stance; the shape is picked up again in the glowing string of onions hanging by her side. Higgins is one domestic object amongst a room of others, her body useful and orderly, her subjectivity entirely collapsed into her labour. Who Higgins is is incidental: her face and uniform are plain and featureless. Yet, for all the eerie disregard that attends the representation of Higgins, the image remains one of absolute harmony – a smug kitchen pastoral. At Charleston one passes the painting several times during the standard tour of the house as it is hung in the second floor corridor, a thoroughfare between rooms, and I feared simply in walking by I would shatter the work's composure: a clatter of pans, spoiled fruit underfoot, a rush of unwanted steam. Perhaps it was easier for Bell to think of the kitchen in this manner, as a space threatened by any outside presence, a calm over which only Higgins could preside.



Figure 31: Vanessa Bell, *The Kitchen*, 1943, The Charleston Trust.

‘One might even consider the domestic work that must have taken place for Husserl to turn to the writing table,’ Ahmed writes of the philosopher, and the same could be said of Bell with her art.⁹⁴ The delegation of labour that enabled the proliferation of Bell’s still life during this period in her life, most of it performed by other women, is only ever reflected upon indirectly within the work. The 1943 still life of Grace Higgins qualifies Bell’s modest works, revealing them to be as much about easy wealth and bourgeois leisure – what never changed about Bell’s lifestyle and art practice – as they are representations of a routine freed up from the more immediate, basic responsibilities of mothering. Seen together, what do the modest paintings, the abstract visions of embodiment and representations of mothering-as-work communicate, if they were taken to express any single (if necessarily vague) message about maternal experience? They make a case for the rich complexity of the mothering experience, and yet certain lives, histories and practices remain outside this seemingly broad remit. How did Higgins, for instance, experience her own mothering of a son, raised in a bedsit above the kitchen at Charleston? These paintings indicate both a fascination with intersubjectivity, the affective ties definitive of

⁹⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 32.

women's lives, as well as that position's limits, highlighting through their very omission the women who did not receive the same compassion, empathy or rigorous study.

In the next chapter of this thesis I examine another form of intersubjectivity explored through still life: the romantic and professional relationship which connected Gluck and the florist Constance Spry. While motherhood, as Bell's work has shown, is necessarily an experience of a power differential, of feeling the responsible subject to an infant's helpless object, in Gluck's work creative collaboration affirms and heightens the promise of romantic reciprocity. The next chapter also considers how still life might record an even greater ambivalence about femininity than what is negotiated in Bell's work: total estrangement from the tenets of one's given gender rather than doubt, frustration and troubled acceptance.

2.5 Edna Waugh, *The Wedding Breakfast* (1898)

What survives of Edna Waugh?

Sketches of sailing ships on cream paper covered in dark stains, the look of wrecks pulled from the sea – anatomy drawings in sweeps of charcoal, legs materialising and striding across the page, modelling motion and strength – roughly executed ideas for larger compositions – drawings judged sufficient experiments in themselves – street scenes with figures, diaristic accounts of her passage through the city – a small bouquet of wildflowers left between the sheets, beside which a man closes his eyes, neck reaching back as though catching their scent – a sunset in stewed peach watercolour with an indigo blue that pours in from the margins; and if it isn't water or wind or the coming darkness, then what is it? – a single black feather, a talisman – Edna sets her pencil down, and the line falters – flower studies around smudges of coloured chalk like loosened earth – a woman leaning into a sketchbook, a woman reading at a window, a woman walking against the wind, a woman waiting by a door, a woman underneath a portrait of another woman, a woman...¹



Figure 32 & 33: Edna Waugh, Sketchbook sheets, undated, TGA 8226, Tate Archive.

¹ TA, TGA 8226, Edna Clarke Hall, Ten boxes of sketches, sketchbooks, poetry, photographs and miscellaneous writings created by Edna Clarke Hall between c.1894 and c.1979.

What survives of Waugh is a cautionary tale of how a disastrous marriage jeopardised a woman's immense talents, so much so it meant she narrowly missed having any work to be remembered by at all.

Judged proficient enough to enter the Slade at the age of fourteen, Waugh went on to win the school's most significant prizes. Waugh had met her husband the year before. Twice her age, William Clarke Hall was a barrister specialising in the rights of children. These professional concerns did not cohere with the troubling desires that animated his life outside of court, however. Hall has been described as 'enchanted' by the then thirteen-year-old Waugh a remark that fails to account for the extremely unsettling power differential that structured their relationship from its start, but might perhaps refer – in its romanticism and wilful naivety – to how Hall's fixation on Waugh drew its emotional repertoire from the Victorian cult of the child.² For adults like Hall emerging from the nineteenth century, childhood was an exulted state of purity to be preserved and prolonged, but for men seizing upon these qualities in girls there were additional, darker motivations. A girl who remained young forever retained her innocence, her inexperience, and ensured she had no desires, no will of her own, no power, no ambition, no talents that might threaten his own, all of which prepared her well to become a wife.

Even Henry Tonks, famous for his hypercritical approach to teaching at the Slade – and who was known to be dismissive of women artists – urged Waugh to think of her career, warning her that marriage would prove disastrous. Her friend Ida Nettleship agreed, insisting to Waugh that her fate as an artist was already sealed, so much had already been overcome in arriving at the Slade, whether or not she loved Hall was irrelevant: she must not marry, at least not yet.³ Waugh did not heed this advice, but neither did Nettleship, who soon married the painter Augustus John, the charismatic brother of her friend Gwen John, a fatal misstep. 'I hope

² Max Browne, 'Edna Clarke Hall (1879-1979) and *Wuthering Heights*', *British Art Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2, (2015), 108.

³ Rebecca John and Michael Holroyd, *The Good Bohemian Letters of Ida John* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 38.

for a different life later on,' Ida had confided to Gwen in August 1904, already solely burdened with the care of their three children, Augustus having lost interest in the pursuit of another lover, and a few years before she died alone giving birth to their fifth child at thirty.⁴

Waugh eventually accepted Hall's proposal. A watercolour still life of her wedding breakfast shows the plenty and possibility Waugh imagined entering into through marriage – bowls heaped with jewel-coloured fruits, their colour spreading beyond their bounds with an infectious brightness – but as a prediction, the work would prove unsound. Hall would go on to ruin Waugh's career, and you might even say her life.



Figure 34: Edna Waugh, Sketchbook sheet, undated, TGA 8226, Tate Archive.

Waugh's later assessment of the aftermath was lucid: 'I was put on a pedestal and forgotten.'⁵

If Hall could not have a girl as a wife, then what he wanted was a housekeeper: a woman willing to manage his affairs, direct the servants and appear by his side at parties, and a woman eager to give herself over to those concerns alone. Hall asked Waugh to remove her paintings

⁴ NLW, MS 22307C, IJ to GJ, August 1904.

⁵ Undated letter from Edna Waugh to Michel Salaman, quoted in Alison Thomas, *Portraits of Women* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 57.

and drawings from the walls of the house. She obliged, hiding her materials too; she waited each morning for the slammed door, the sudden quiet; once sure of his departure, she began working in secret. 'I think it would be nicer for her to do other things,' Gwen John wrote to Ursula Tyrwhitt, politeness tempering her alarm, on hearing that Waugh was unwell, unhappy, and having another baby.⁶

Waugh had begun exhibiting work while still a student, first with the Allied Artists' Association and then with the New English Art Club, a trajectory common amongst the most gifted members of her cohort. Marriage curtailed her productivity and confidence, but it did not stop her working altogether. She held commercially successful solo shows in London at the Chenil Gallery in 1914 and the Redfern Gallery in 1924; the ten years that elapsed between those exhibitions belonged to William. He mostly stayed away from his wife's demonstrations of genius, and his disapproval meant that Waugh kept her distance from the social aspects of her exhibitions too: she skipped the opening nights, never directly receiving the praise or encountering new buyers and fans; if she experienced those successes at all, it was always necessarily after the fact, second hand.

What survives of Waugh are the scores of watercolours produced for her project on Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*; loose and impassioned and full of a transfigured anger, they would define the two decades that followed. In the novel, Waugh found a framework through which to understand her own longing and frustration; in placing the narratives of grief alongside one another, the agonising present pressed against the heightened fictional world, she could attach her suffering to a story larger than her own experience. She began illustrating the novel, and all the untapped intensities from her romantic life were transferred into a simulation of love over which she had total control. Assisted by Mark Gertler, Waugh spent long afternoons rummaging for clothes to draw from in second-hand shops in the East End,

⁶ NLW, NLWMS21468D, GJ to UT, 4 February 1910.

returning to her fifteenth-century house in Upminster with bags full of material and a clear vision for her next composition. In the absence of models, Waugh used herself as the basis for Cathy and Heathcliff. One recent historian claims that in modelling for Heathcliff herself there is a 'lack of strength and conviction' in Waugh's depiction of men.⁷ But he misses the point.

Waugh extracted the idea of a passionate, devoted man out of her loneliness, and it shows. Naturally the fantasy lacked conviction: it had no precedent in Waugh's life to work from. She was already accustomed to playing the part of both lovers, attending to her own needs in response to her husband's neglect. Why not use that experience of self-sufficiency in her art? Waugh discovered more compelling than the realities of men were her own capacities for the erotic, which she was not afraid to use in the manner that the poet Audre Lorde insists women should: as a form of knowledge.⁸ For Waugh the erotic was an instinctual response that became a resource from which to explore fictional characters, and from these studies of anatomy and psyche it became a more comprehensive project, a means of mapping out an alternative version of heteromascularity – one with its own power and principles, moulded by and through the interests of women.

Wracked with a loneliness made worse by the atrocities of the Great War, Waugh suffered a nervous breakdown in 1919. Omens in her sketchbook: a drawing of a woman's face which disintegrates below the eye, the rest of her features a succession of wavering lines. Neat plaited hair, those basic appearances maintained; her mouth gone altogether, her voice stoppered. The drawing communicate a total collapse of the self – a crisis well known to Waugh. Only under duress did her husband give her a studio.

Much of her work was destroyed in the bombings of the Second World War – losses Waugh met with indifference. By then, her hope in her art had run out.

One of the many sketches of women amongst Waugh's papers has her subject in a

⁷ Browne, 'Edna Clarke Hall (1879-1979) and Wuthering Heights', 108.

⁸ See: Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power' in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017)

billowing smock, entirely absorbed, her hand moving across a sheet of paper. For centuries on canvas women's hands were folded obediently in their laps, or women's hands were ineffectually guarding themselves from an oncoming assault, or women's hands were gesturing the eye to the most valuable parts of their bodies. Waugh was gathering the means to retaliate against these tropes. Over the next few pages Waugh crops the composition until it is simply the hand with charcoal balanced between its fingers, and it is an active hand insisting upon its ability to impress itself upon and remake the given world, and she draws it repeatedly as she chases the precise shape of that labour. Accuracy was as desirable as it was for any artist, and for Waugh the repetition of this charged embodied fragment allowed her not only to perfect its look, but also to explore all the determination, wilfulness and refusal art made under patriarchy necessarily involved. For artists like Waugh, so much of the body would undergo a similar treatment, a reformulation informed by ceaseless empirical study: limbs redrawn, adjusted, practised, reconstructed again and again, then scrapped, the old associations resisted with every mark made.

Waugh lived to be one hundred. Those hands were multiplying themselves over a sheet of paper in some drawer long after her husband died, and perhaps it was their promise, a kind of radiation that filled the house pervasively and soundlessly and forever, which sustained her.



Figure 35: Edna Waugh, Sketchbook, undated, TGA 8226, Tate Archive.

3: Gluck, Constance Spry and Queer Collaboration

Prologue: a note on pronouns

On the underside of glossy prints of Gluck's paintings, the kind sent out for publicity purposes, any possible errors were pre-empted. Written in neat black cursive, centred so as to arrest attention, the message was clear: 'Please return in good condition to Gluck, no prefix, suffix or quotes.' Often all that is specified, what is deemed the priority, was the instruction 'no prefix.' Yet in a sense each part of the demand meant the same thing: it was an expectation of courtesy. Creased edges, spillages or rips are as noticeable and belittling of the work as a lazy hypothesis about the artist's gender. Amongst dozens of prints, Gluck repeatedly requested that the recipients respectfully handle a self just as you would an artwork. Images move by their very nature towards silence, but Gluck's commentary ensured there was always at least one statement inside them readymade. Whatever your assumptions are, the correction states, whether it's about gender or genre or artistic personhood, or the interaction of all three, you must suspend them. If a figure holding a brush before a canvas has begun to take shape, then that process is arrested. The phrase effects an absolute focus on the image itself. This was how Gluck wanted to be regarded: an artist foremost, without the overdetermining effects of one gender or another. Styling herself simply as 'Gluck' – an androgynous contraction of her surname, Gluckstein – the role of the artist offered freedom from the pressures of femininity and family alike. So many of the letters in the archive nevertheless were addressed to and opened with *Miss*.¹ Gluck was confronted with how rarely her most simple requests were valued, how little she was listened to or seen or understood, from the moment most professional interactions began. This was what it was as a queer woman in flight from conventional femininity to live and make art under

¹ See: The Gluckstein Family Archive, Boxes 1-3 (Professional Correspondence).

patriarchy. In the folder containing her photographic prints, I was surprised at how many Gluck had inscribed: there were dozens. There was reason to be so insistent.

The issue of naming, in bringing together questions about gender and artistic personhood, and their possible transformation or refusal through defiant acts of expression or representation, condenses the issues at play in this chapter. In this chapter, I will examine Gluck's art through an attention to how a discomfort with gender might shape a preference for genre. Then, I will explore the queer collaborative practice that defined Gluck's most famous works, the flower paintings she embarked upon after 1932 through an encounter (and later a relationship) with society florist Constant Spry. The insistence upon ownership and authorship precisely understood, on the singularity of Gluck's presence within the context of her work's composition which these annotations implicitly affirm is productively complicated by the involvement of Spry, an avant-garde practitioner in her own right and a powerful influence on Gluck's paintings. This chapter is led by a belief in a charged and productive proximity – a relationship of mutual making/remaking – between artistic forms (such as genres and subjects) and gender or sexual identities.

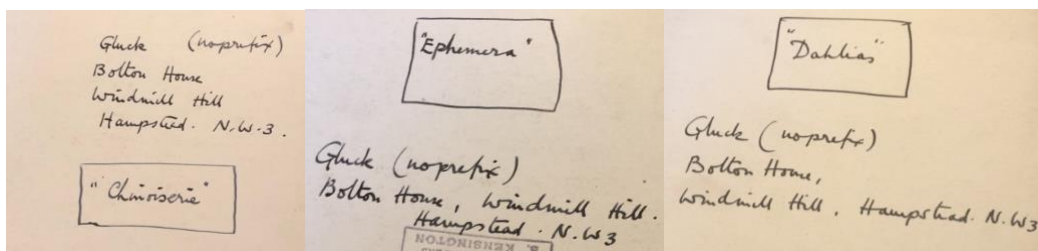


Figure 36, 37, 38: Gluck, Assorted Prints, undated c. 1930s, Box No. 3, The Gluckstein Family Archive.

While writing about Gluck the question of what pronoun to use arose immediately. A prefix reshapes the body that it describes into a predetermined form, and 'no prefix' suggests Gluck did not recognise the woman marked out by Miss. Occasionally within relationships or amongst other queer women Gluck took on masculine names, becoming Tim or Timothy with

one lover, and Peter regularly enough in her youth that she went by it in a portrait by Romaine Brooks. However, the full title of Brooks's portrait is *Peter: A Young English Girl*: pronouns, prefixes and names did not necessarily come together neatly in an expression of a coherent gender identity. Indeed, for Gluck, perhaps it was the assumptions tied to heteronormativity rather than the prescriptiveness of assigned gender that she was hoping to avoid. From the absence of similar requests about her pronouns, it seems Gluck was less concerned with 'she' than with 'Miss', a term which renders women's marital status identifiable, and as Gluck never intended to marry – nor to enter into any standard, heterosexual courtship ritual – there was little point in placing herself within this framework. Not only that, but as an artist to identify with 'Miss' was to immediately plunge herself inside a misogynistic system within which being a woman risked being dismissed as an amateur. Gluck valued her work more than that. 'No prefix' was about resisting a variety of frames society placed around Gluck as an artist, as a lesbian, and as a subject assigned female at birth. Framing was a charged issue for Gluck in both her art and life, so much so that she designed her own frames, patented them, and never had her work displayed in anything else: three layers of wood graduated like a shallow set of steps and painted in an opaque, matte cream. The frames were Gluck's signature writ large, an insurance against her work ever being misidentified.

'No prefix, suffix or quotes' had an additional function, stating the uniqueness Gluck perceived in her art as much as her identity. The phrase was a claim to being an iconoclast, the likes of which no formalities could contain, and Gluck only ever exhibited her work in one man shows for this very reason. But Gluck was not alone in experimenting with gender expression. Her self-styling was consistent with a small but significant group of middle class and aristocratic women who since the turn of the century had been cutting their hair and abandoning feminine dress, living alone or with other women, forging rich and elaborate subcultures which radically extricated them from heterosexual society. 'Masculine identification with social impunity,' Jack Halberstam explains, 'required money and social status,' and Gluck, the heir to the Lyons

fortune, was one such wealthy women who made radical use of her immense privilege.² Yet challenges to the naturalness of gender were not necessarily confined to these groups, and as the century progressed new modes of gendered being were filtering through to wider society. Through the loss of men in conflict, and the absolute upheaval socially this move incurred, World War I enabled certain women to live out their fantasies of masculinity through taking on jobs in the police, factories, farms and the military. Amongst communities in which non-normative gender identities were forever being constructed and adjusted, no doubt there were those who would have found a home in trans identity. Others, as Halberstam argues in his comprehensive study of female masculinities, ‘were content to live their lives in masculine clothing and take male names without completely letting go of their claim to femaleness.’³ I could not say precisely how Gluck’s relationship with masculinity was lived. Personal papers are not articulate on the matter. The paintings can hardly be trusted as the primary source of data. However, each sentence I wrote required a decision, to guess at Gluck’s affinity with masculinity through the material I had at hand. ‘She’, ‘they’ and ‘he’ all possessed a certain rightness or relevance, each informing my understanding of Gluck’s experiences, the assumption of one never precluding the presence of any other, a coexistence in which the available language briefly felt elastic, inclusive, capable of imagining the complexity and fluidity of Gluck’s gender identity. Yet writing a life according to this principle of negative capability inevitably created obscurities: on the page, for clarity and coherence, a choice became necessary. Whatever pronoun I prioritised, experiences would be foreclosed, nuances lost. What if Gluck’s identification shifted over time? Or according to social group? Alone the pronouns felt overly confident, inevitably limiting – meagre, flat, and static. I contemplated using Gluck’s name repeatedly in place of any single pronoun, but the rapidity with which this strategy became unwieldy was itself instructive,

² Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 87.

³ *Ibid*, 88.

revealing how much gender is implicated in ordinary language, and how ubiquitous the risk of misrecognition for trans and non-binary people.

After much consideration, I decided to use she/her, partly to acknowledge that these were the pronouns available to Gluck for her own use during her lifetime. I don't doubt that Gluck was uneasy or dissatisfied with what 'she' conventionally meant. Yet I wondered whether for Gluck pronouns were simply not regarded as definitive statements compelled to articulate only a single, conventional experience of gendered embodiment, and whether they functioned instead as condensed descriptions that were loosely adopted only to be experimented with, manipulated, expanded and pushed against. For Gluck, 'she' need not obey the strict narratives it appeared to perpetuate. 'She' could contain multitudes, including its own disavowal. If we are to take seriously Halberstam's claim that 'masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects,' then there is no reason not to consider the female pronoun a point of departure in this context rather than an impasse.⁴ Throughout this chapter, I use 'she' as an expansive and flexible signifier, and under the premise that it could and can be a tool through which to widen the parameters of what it is to be a woman.

Genre Trouble: Gluck's early work

Gluck's commitment to her art practice coincided with her decision to lose her female forename in personal and professional contexts, to cut her long hair into a masculine crop and to begin dressing in men's shirts and trousers. Given her family's decision to enable her entry into art school only if she remained living at home and attended the conservative, female-dominated St. John's Wood Art School, Gluck's self-presentation was not only an authentic expression of her gender identity, but was also a vital strategy for indexing a commitment to an experimental artistic practice aligned with radical gender politics. Unlike many of her peers at St. John's Wood,

⁴ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1.

art school was not an additional holding space in which femininity might be practiced and perfected ahead of securing a husband. Gluck later described walking home from an unstimulating afternoon at art school and entering her father's garage, pulling over her head one of his old, battered jackets and beginning to paint.⁵ Her early choice of uniform and its enabling effect on her work would prove prescient. The details of this anecdote make visible an impulse present throughout Gluck's oeuvre and practice: for her, art was meaningful in how it heightened and dramatized a connection to the spaces, styles and subjectivities of alternatives masculinities.

As a genre, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis, still life has not only traditionally been associated with femininity, but it has also been implicated in a long history of policing its definition and experience. In the early period of Gluck's practice, and with good reason in this context, examples of still life are rare. Instead, Gluck painted genre scenes set inside boxing matches, music halls and circuses, repeatedly aligning herself with the public spaces most comfortably frequented in the early twentieth century by men, and the same environments that had been celebrated by avant-garde painters as privileged sites of experience since the nineteenth century.⁶ Over and above any interest in wealth, status and inheritance, the ordinary remit of the society portraiture tradition her work was situated within, Gluck painted judges, comedians and sportsman so as to exaggerate the role played by style in their construction of identity. The coming together of professional costume, facial expression, and bodily gesture is studied with great interest, and each figure is shown to combine these behaviours and dress in their own iteration of masculinity. The ringlets of a judge's wig and the shiny shorts and outsized gloves on a boxer could not be further from one another in their style and intent, but in Gluck's paintings they are aligned as forms of masculine masquerade. In emphasising the burden of meaning born by the props that accompany these men's roles, Gluck's portraiture questions the apparently

⁵ Diana Souhami. *Gluck: Her Biography* (London: Quercus Press, 2013), 38

⁶ See: Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity' in *Vision and Difference* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

natural connection between masculinity and power (the judge), masculinity, sporting prowess and strength (sportsmen) and even masculinity and humour (the comedian). Through these representations of men, standard assumptions about brute strength, agility, receptibility, intelligence, and power are invoked only to be gently probed by camp or feminine details: the soft pink flesh of the judge's face; the daintiness of the boxers' bodies seen at a great distance. In other words, neither straightforward observation nor an aggrandisement or flattery common to portraiture are the aspiration here; the real subject of each of these works is the workings of gender itself. In *Ernest Thesiger* (1925-6), for instance, conventional masculine attributes are exaggerated with a queer attention to the denaturalisation of gender. A famous English theatre actor, Thesiger is stood before the curtain to herald the end of the evening's entertainment, an arrangement that ensures masculinity and performance are placed in charged relation to one another from the outset. The theatrical setting brings to mind ideas about performativity and gender, how masculinity and femininity are constructed through the repetition of specific stylized bodily and non-verbal gestures rather than being biologically predetermined, an idea memorably summarised by Judith Butler's description of gender as 'a kind of imitation for which there is no original.'⁷ 'Gender is an impersonation,' Butler clarified in a subsequent interview, and 'becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits.'⁸ Accordingly, in a style that borders upon caricature, Thesiger is tall, thin and straight-backed: more like a marionette than a fleshly physical human, his appearance at once makes reference to a gender theatrics similar to that outlined by Butler, and caustically alludes to a vision of an English, middle class heteromascularity aligned with decency, stoicism and reserve. The constellation of ideas surrounding the figure of Thesiger illustrates how hegemonic gender as an institution is connected to claims about propriety and normality within the ideologies of nationalism, and –

⁷ Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry, Marilyn Pearsall (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 378.

⁸ Judith Butler and Liz Kotz, 'The Body You Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler,' *Art Forum*, Vol. 31, No. 3, (November 1992), 85.

perhaps more pertinently – heterosexuality. In Sedgwick's words, gender and sexuality are 'distinct though intimately entangled axes of analysis,' and so exposing the imitative qualities of gender quickly reveals a similar set of processes at work in heterosexuality.⁹ As Butler writes, 'hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations,' the anxiety and absurdity of which Gluck's glance at the rigid, imperious bearing of Thesiger reveals.¹⁰

However, for those literate in the English stage in the twenties, and in the work of Thesiger at this time in particular, his presence has an additional queer charge. In 1925, the composition date of this work, and therefore its potential setting, Thesiger was appearing in drag in Noel Coward's lavish musical revue *On with the Dance*, first in Manchester, then later in the London Pavilion. Gluck almost certainly frequented the Pavilion during the twenties given its proximity – a two minute walk – from the Trocadero Restaurant (itself once a music hall) which was owned by her family and popular with Gluck and her circle.¹¹ This early example of Coward's work, like the theatrical pieces that made his reputation, defined itself through its 'interrogation of the moral validity of normative gender ideology,' as Penny Farfan puts it.¹² Prior to Coward's most thorough investigation of these themes, and indeed what made that focus possible, the music hall was cultivating its own art forms and audience interrogative of binary representations of gender. Through normalising cross identification through drag, through calling into question the given roles and narratives constitutive of heterosexual relationships, and in subversions of the standard marriage plot through comedic diversion and deflation, the musical revue was circulating its own gender theory in which embodiment and desire were pliable, unpredictable and anti-normative.¹³ Which is to say that the naturalness of

⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay' in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 156.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 125.

¹¹ Souhami. *Gluck: Her Biography*, 26.

¹² Penny Farfan, *Performing Queer Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 58.

¹³ *Ibid*, 59.

heterosexuality and binary gender alike were challenged by the kind of performance represented by Theisger in *On with the Dance*, and Gluck's representation of the show's conclusion is animated by these tensions. Even contemporary reviews registered something of this radical perspective: in May of that year, *The Morning Post* described *On with the Dance* in distinctly queer terms as 'modern, bizarre, grotesque, fantastic, unnatural.'¹⁴ Farfan describes how 'queer modernist performance might pass as light entertainment in the theatrical mainstream,' and both 'queered comic form and fostered queer spectatorship,' statements which the revealing sequence of adjectives in the contemporary review confirm.¹⁵ The portrait of Theisger suggests that Gluck was interested in finding a genre attentive to the emerging public spaces in which queer art and alternative masculinities were free to flourish. Further, choosing to capture Theisger at the conclusion of the performance, out of drag and once again conventionally masculine, the show's subversive content realised and now teeming behind the curtain, Gluck ensures the painting radiates queerness only to those aware of or sympathetic with all that *On with the Dance* represented.

However, the portrait also registers an interest in the exalted spaces of modernity which Gluck likely strategically selected for her work so as to align her practice with those of her successful male contemporaries. Across literature and art in the early twentieth century modernism was enamoured with the music hall. To reflect and contain a new set of experiences – affective, psychic and sexual – modern artists looked to newly established or popularised urban publics. The music hall was lauded in the late Victorian period by intellectuals and cultural critics for its vigour, vitality, charisma and vulgarity, terms loaded with fantasies about their working class audience.¹⁶ In an essay on Walter Sickert, who was a typical proponent of the musical hall as a site of creative experiment, David Peters Corbett asserts that 'the music hall

¹⁴ Raymond Mander, *Theatrical companion to Coward: A pictorial record of the first performances of the theatrical works of Noël Coward*, (London: Rockliff, 1957), 19.

¹⁵ Farfan, *Performing Queer Modernism*, 58.

¹⁶ See: Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 14-35.

paintings use the scenes of contemporary entertainment in the halls to stand for the character and meaning of the modern.¹⁷ Expanding on what made the musical revue feel so modern, Faye Hammil describes how it engaged in the distinctly contemporary binaries of ‘modernist/popular; aristocratic/middle-class; eccentric/mainstream; difficult/accessible.’¹⁸ What connected Sickert’s representations to the recent French modernist tradition of painting urban publics, Corbett states, was the focus on the audience, their gestures, character and attention. Corbett goes on to describe how this focus is assisted by an emphasis on visual problems in the compositions: mirrors are inserted into the rooms so as to multiply and fragment the audience. Their presence is further distorted, and our attention as viewers more intensely captivated, through entry into the scene via strange angles and obfuscation of the figures through carefully deployed chiaroscuro.¹⁹ Combining crowds of people with a sense of irregular perception articulated something crucial about vision, emotion and phenomenology in the new urban public. These aesthetic strategies mimic the affective style and structure of the music hall’s unpredictable social encounters, its mixture of collective feeling and private isolation. They evoke the effervescent feeling of anticipation, the sensation of risk, the rush of anxiety as it melts into ecstasy, the dissolution of self amongst the throng. The music hall, in addition to this, as Barry J Faulks claims, was considered ‘a distinctly English art,’ which had ‘come to represent the national character and attained a role in forging the national temper.’²⁰ Their appeal for an artist like Sickert was clear. Since ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionists’ (curated by arbiter of contemporary taste, the critic and Europhile Roger Fry) opened in November 1910, continental aesthetics were

¹⁷ David Peters Corbett, ‘Seeing into Modernity: Walter Sickert’s Music Hall Scenes, c. 1887-1907 and English Modernism,’ *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (April 2000), 294.

¹⁸ Faye Hammil, ‘Noel Coward and the Sitwells: enmity, celebrity, popularity,’ *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 39, No. 1, (2015), 130.

¹⁹ Corbett, ‘Seeing into Modernity: Walter Sickert’s Music Hall Scenes, c. 1887-1907 and English Modernism,’ 296.

²⁰ Barry J. Faulk, ‘Modernism and the Popular: Eliot’s Music Halls,’ *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 8, No.4, (November 2001), 605.

understood to define modernism; the music hall promised a new setting and store of pertinent themes that might link Englishness and modernism.

However, comparing Sickert's music halls and theatres with the space chosen by Gluck, it is clear that while an interest in Englishness is shared (indicated by the choice of the Thesiger, a symbol of national character) the strategies and aims in relation to modern subjectivity are different. The stage is approached from a clear, frontal angle, with all extraneous detail pared back so as to emphasise the striking appearance of Thesiger. In Sickert's music halls, by contrast, our vision is fractured, warped and riddled, and that implied loss of control, its headiness and heat, intimates desire and intoxication, even the distorted vision of those effected by syphilis. This distinction between clarity and disorder establishes different anxieties and fantasies. Sickert's music hall functions through a heteronormative economy of desire in which gender determines who is looking and being looked at: hence the exaggerated emphasis on distortions of vision, perspective and appearances, expressions of fear about male power and virility. Gluck's painting, however, is more concerned with visibility itself. With a heightened solitariness evocative of the isolation imposed by phobic violence, the figure of Thesiger offers himself up for transformation by the crowd. To occupy space, command attention and receive approval and praise speak to visions of acceptance and assimilation suitable to the queer subject accustomed to castigation and exclusion. However, taking the theatre as a metaphor for queer experience is not about aligning queer subjects with artifice; rather, it points to the narrative and interpretive devices queer people are compelled to invent to make sense of their lives, not only to be explicable to themselves, but also so as to appear coherent and legible to the broader public. Even Gluck's emphasis on the curtain as the central, commanding surface in the composition (rather than mirrors) and its creation of visible and invisible space (rather than multiple refractions) alludes to an affective architecture common to queer experience at this time. The closet, a metaphor of gay secrecy and disclosure, to paraphrase Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, has been a consistent structuring force in Western gay culture, and especially with the 'crisis of sexual

definition' as the nineteenth century opened into the twentieth.²¹ How to live and how to be as a modern queer subject, or the dance between private knowing and public action, are all part of Gluck's singular queering of a modernist theme.



Figure 39: Gluck, *Ernest Thesiger*, 1925-26, Private Collection.

Another engagement with modernity and theatrical spectacle, and which also represents an engagement with masculinity and genre, is Gluck's painting of a boxing match, *Baldock vs Bell at the Royal Albert Hall* (1927). Observed from a distance suggestive of omnipotence, marking the painter out as autonomous and omniscient, the crowd is reduced to an anonymous, identical mass of masculine figures in monochrome. As the gaze moves higher up in the stalls, the men are increasingly blurred, their forms blending with one another, until they are nothing but a wall of muted colour. Little more than dabs of paint, these men are easily accessed, represented and reproduced; they are colourless, and bloodless; there is nothing powerful about them. The boxers, similarly, are miniaturised and fragile, like marionettes – they share the smallness,

²¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Durham: NC, Duke University Press, 1990), 74.

lifelessness and rigid physicality of Ernest Thesiger – and the light emanating from the ring nearly obliterates them both. With its emphasis on the central geometric structure and its glaring light, a possible visual and semantic joke emerges, mixing event and object, the boxing match and a box of matches: both are quadrilateral surfaces activated by explosive striking gestures. The box of matches was a common component of Cubist variations on still life by male painters: allied to the world of men, indicative of the urban public rather than domestic spaces, and of transgression rather than composure, it was used to temper the genre's feminine associations.²² However it was also an object with explicit ties to female masculinity and queer desire: Penny Tinkler argues that the twenties in particular saw women's smoking transformed into an instrument of queer identity construction.²³ Large and small, masculine and feminine, public and private, virtue and vice, body and mind, intelligibility and ambiguity, homosocial and homosexual: these epistemologically charged pairings jostle for dominance not unlike Baldock and Bell at the centre of the Gluck's work.

²² Examples of smoking paraphernalia in modernist still life by men include: Pablo Picasso, *Pipe Rack and Still Life on a table* (1911), *Bottle of Suze* (1912); Georges Braque, *Bottle, Glass and Pipe* (1914), *Glass, Pipe and Newspaper* (1917); Juan Gris, *Pipe and Glass* (1923). Related, especially in linking smoking with humour, if somewhat distinct owing to its surrealist allegiance – and not painted for another two years – is René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929): below a representation of a pipe are the words, 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe'.

²³ Penny Tinkler, 'Sapphic Smokers and English Modernities' in *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture*, ed. Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 75.

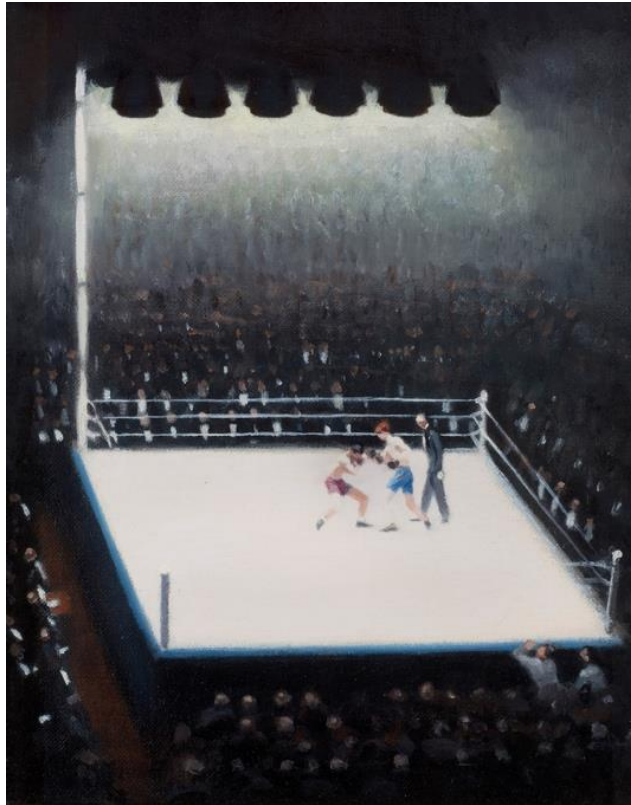


Figure 40: Gluck, *Baldock vs Bell at the Royal Albert Hall*, 1927, Private Collection.

While its play with gender and genre were intent upon defying convention, Gluck's boxing painting, like her music hall work, also exhibits an interest in slotting herself and her work within an established artistic tradition. 'A fascination with boxing among artists was widespread in Europe and dated to at least the late nineteenth century,' Bernard Vere states, listing the various modern artists who subsequently enjoyed or participated in boxing: Pablo Picasso, George Braque, and André Derain to name but a few.²⁴ In the contemporary English context, art and boxing had been aligned since the Vorticists' 1914 Blast manifesto. Under the negative heading 'BLAST,' Wyndham Lewis placed 'humour' and 'sport,' criticising both as forms of disassociation distinct to the English national character, but it seems boxing was not tainted by this association, with numerous popular boxers appearing under the opposing

²⁴ Bernard Vere, "'BLAST SPORT'?: Vorticism, Sport and William Roberts's Boxers', *modernism/modernity*, Vol. 24, No.2, (2017), 349.

approving category of 'BLESS'.²⁵ To use Vere's concise summary of the sport's draw for modernists, the separate status Lewis insists upon for boxing was because it was 'a mass spectacle that also incorporated a certain frisson of outsider appeal.'²⁶ Boxing came to neatly summarise many of the concerns of the male dominated avant-garde: it was popular, and encouraged nationalistic fervour; it was an art of skilled and unimpeded motion, explosive tension, and – although Vere unconvincingly contests this – hyper-masculinity, a vitality indistinguishable from virility and violence. The obsession many avant-garde painters like Lewis cultivated with working class men, to whom they ascribed ideas about authenticity and grit, and a subject position almost none of them understood from experience, was also served by boxing. An art of regulation, control and visibility – to paraphrase David Scott – boxing had an allure that subsequently shaped the aesthetic of its artistic admirers.²⁷ Or, in Clare Warden's formulation, it became its own 'methodological approach.'²⁸ To use boxing as a method was to not simply think of it as a subject, but to consider an artwork and its process or composition more broadly in terms of violence, masculine embodiment, movement, competition, and with greater recourse to instinct than intellect. Sarah Victoria Turner writes that according to its practitioners, 'modern art (and modern sculpture in particular) was hard, tough, muscular, masculine and primitive' and the formal properties of these artworks were increasingly determined by this rhetoric.²⁹ In these works, an abstract logic pares back urban scenes to jagged geometric forms rendered in harsh or muted colours, suggestive of a city living under an eclipse. Desolate yet crowded, teeming with energy yet distinctly unalive, these paintings take the bleak Darwinian theatrics of boxing as their world's founding premise.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 350.

²⁷ David Scott, 'Boxing and Art,' *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 4, (December 2019), 306.

²⁸ Claire Warden, "'Queer Music-Hall Sport": All-In Wrestling and Modernist Fakery,' *modernism / modernity*, Vol. 27, No.1, (2020), 150.

²⁹ Sarah Victoria Turner, 'Muscular Modernism', in 'In Focus: 'Wrestlers' 1914, cast 1965, by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska,' *Tate Research Publication*, (July 2013), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/gaudier-brzeska-wrestlers/muscular-modernism-r1142323>. [accessed 22 July 2020]

Gluck, however, does not emphasise the visceral, muscular or violent in her work: distant and radiant, the boxers are pictured before any incapacitating blows, and as Simon Martin points out, the figures themselves are in fact curiously gender neutral.³⁰ Boxing was unique as a fulcrum in debates about masculinity at the turn of the century, and Gluck's work appears more engaged with this ideological element, or with unravelling the terms of this kind of machismo, than in the potential applicability of boxing to aesthetics.³¹ When seen against the work of the Vorticists, and despite its abstract flourishes – the wipe of colour that constitutes the crowd, the wispy attenuated forms of the boxers – *Baldock vs Bell at the Royal Albert Hall* remains tethered to a figurative idiom. For Gluck, what boxing itself as a practice articulated about masculinity was too fascinating to be subsumed by demonstrations of an experimental modernist aesthetic. At a time when suffrage, shifting public discourse on sexuality and the flourishing of queer subcultures in urban centres were all challenging binary gender, boxing functioned as an aggressive reassurance of the norms that suddenly seemed under threat. Here were men evidencing their biological destinies, using their strength to dominate and destroy one another, laying claim to sporting successes as they might women and land – engaging nationalistic as well as patriarchal fantasies – and all the while encouraging a male audience to aspire to the same. However, for a form that stood for many for qualities oriented solely towards heteromascularity, boxing was full of potential for that very term's disavowal. Boxing is homosocial sport centred around nimble, instinctual embodiment; it envelops experiences of pain, endurance, and shock; it involves closely monitoring the body of the other and moving rhythmically with or against it; it draws men into a relation that blends the intimate with the violent. The spectatorship involves large groups of men enraptured with the physicality of other men. The queer possibility of its

³⁰ Simon Martin, 'The Individual Artist: Gluck and Modern British Art', in *Gluck: Art and Identity*, 90.

³¹ Unlike her contemporaries, however, there is not much evidence that Gluck was interested in boxing as a class-specific pursuit. Her disinterest in this could be because of a number of personal factors. The class fetish was bound up with a group of male artists with whom she had little contact. She was a gender-queer Jewish artist, and therefore did not need an artificial access point into the experience of oppression, a surrogate figure onto which ideas about suffering and truth could be projected, unlike Lewis and his peers.

repertoire of physical and affective experience is obvious. As Turner writes in relation to Henri Gaudier Brezeka's sculptures of wrestling men, there are 'slippages between the violent aesthetics of the fight and those of intercourse,' although rarely are these ambivalent drives so explicitly stated, as they are in Brezeka's work, in other art by men which took pugilistic sport as its subject.³² Martin confidently states Gluck's 'lack of interest in the physicality of the body,' but her interest was always more about identification than a straightforward erotics, and as such her connection to the bodies in the ring need not be solely indexed by an explicit look at anatomy.³³ Instead of a close attention to musculature, or an eroticising of any single body part, Gluck offers up crosscurrents of affect centred around those bodies. Observe the men eagerly craning forward, rapt, desperate to catch a glimpse of the bodies in motion; or the men quietly observant in their seats, more reticent, their responses tempered by reserve, shame or embarrassment. Or the boxers wholly given over to observation of one another, bracing themselves for contact, more attuned to one another than any other coupling in the room, moving together as if for an embrace.

Kasia Boddy has boxing as a 'metaphor for opposition,' and Gluck's painting of the sport has a similar function, bringing a set of struggles about gender, sexuality and genre – and their various couplings and uncouplings – into the frame.³⁴ *Baldock vs Bell at the Royal Albert Hall* questions the naturalised connections between heteromascularity and its most commonly associated activities, bodily habits and emotional characteristics. In doing so, the painting also reveals the small measure of imaginative work required to make masculinity mean differently. Boxing yields its most conventional associations under the pressure of a few carefully selected aesthetic strategies, the most effective of which is the least explicitly experimental: the relaxed figurative idiom that allows sustained attention to individual embodiment. When bodies are still bodies rather than abstracted lengths of steel and wire, articulations of alienation or psychic flux,

³² Turner, 'Muscular Modernism'.

³³ Martin, 'The Individual Artist: Gluck and Modern British Art', 90.

³⁴ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 4.

or simply examples of dynamic movement – as they were for the Cubists and Vorticists – those bodies can be attended to, dwelled over, learnt from, and their way of being (rather than their bodies themselves) eroticised in the broadest terms. Gluck's chosen aesthetic suggests that for her, the bodies themselves mattered immensely. Drawing on the queer tradition of thought that ranges from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to Carolyn Dinshaw, Amelia Jones argues that 'queer is anamorphosis, the disorienting of the subject in space and time,' and there is an appeal in seeing a queer gaze as such: as a force capable of upending the given world and creating a new order.³⁵ And yet there is an undeniable queer charge to the way in which the gaze functions otherwise in Gluck's painting: the pleasure with which it abides with and covets the depicted bodies. This is a queer gaze unaccustomed to admitting to the objects it fixates upon, and no other context provides so absolute a reversal of this fate than a scene of ecstatic public mass spectatorship. Aligning itself with presence and pleasure rather than anarchy and revision, *Baldock vs Bell at the Royal Albert Hall* is a scene of queer wish fulfilment as much as it is a laying claim to modernist themes and inventiveness.

All of Gluck's early work was a product of how gender determined what genre was considered serious. Still life neither spoke to her ambitions as an artist, nor served as an additional identity marker of her female masculinity in the same way as these genre scenes. On first look, *The Pine Cone*, a still life from the early twenties, presents itself as an exception. If an elevation of femininity is what is expected, or indeed if what is desired are any of the ordinary messages of the still life genre, then the viewer will be disappointed. With its unfussy and pared back aesthetic, a vision that makes even the apple look muscular, *The Pine Cone* studies the results of applying a hardened and unsparing focus to a feminine genre. There is no sentiment, and no suggestion of conventional feminine commodities, routines or affects. The mood is sober and uncomplicated: the costs of gender, or visions of compromised agency – what might be expected

³⁵ Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 175.

from an artist who struggled to have both her career and gender identity sufficiently compensated or acknowledged by others – are not this work’s concern. The aspiration is more utopian. Here Gluck begins to think through what domesticity would look like drained of conventional femininity, what exhilarating difference and unanticipated joy might emerge if an unorthodox masculine resonance were permitted to flourish within the home. No assumed roles, no punishing duties, no alienating artifice; no matriarch or patriarch. *The Pine Cone’s* atmosphere of forcefulness, resilience, and composure, its magnetic absence of anxiety or embarrassment or bitterness, represents one possible vision of this uncharted world. However, it is her later flower works, with their intermingling of hyper-feminine aesthetics and the unexpected masculine energy of this earlier work, which reveal the real radical work that could be done to the genre.



Figure 41: Gluck, *The Pinecone*, early 1920s, Private Collection.

The Flower Paintings: Gluck's and queer collaboration

In her early work, Gluck aspired to emulate key terms from the modern so as to construct a public identity as an artist. By contrast, her most celebrated works from the thirties were arguably private in their address, collaboratively produced – they were made with and for her lover, society florist Constance Spry – and tethered to realist artistic traditions which dominant avant-garde modernist aesthetics had only recently reclaimed, and with entirely different attachments to those conventions than those which motivated Gluck. Maggie Nelson is right to assert that a ‘distrust of beauty’ is a ‘modernist tic,’ an impulse which makes Gluck’s uncomplicated fixation upon the extravagantly beautiful throughout this sequence so unusual and uncategorizable; it is in turn what has made the work even more resistant to critical enquiry than still life is ordinarily.³⁶ The recent exhibition (2018) on Gluck, ‘Gluck: Art and Identity’ delivered on the promise of its title by focusing largely on queer identity construction through an examination of the collection of clothing donated to the Brighton Museum before her death, as well as her portraiture. The flower paintings feature prominently in the exhibition catalogue without being discussed in any meaningful way in the accompanying literature: they are used as an example of her art, but are made to say nothing of identity. I intend to counter the apparently unassailable muteness of these flower works by entering them through a series of questions: what meanings do these works circulate about queer collaboration as an act and as an aesthetic? What do they do to the realist tradition they appear to so uncomplicatedly replicate and celebrate? What do they contribute to traditionally phobic discourses on gender and nature?

Robert Lehman explains that as ‘a viable art-critical concept, genius reached its zenith during the early decades of the nineteenth century, when it served as a key component of the romantic ideology.’³⁷ Lehman cites shifts in technology and education and their role in reshaping

³⁶ Maggie Nelson, *Women, The New York School, And Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 23.

³⁷ Robert Lehman, ‘Original Nonsense: James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, and Modernism’s Genius,’ *modernism/modernity*, Vol. 27, No. 2, (2020), 342.

literary and aesthetic discourse as the reason for the disappearance of this notion over the decades of the twentieth century.³⁸ However, Lehman's essay goes on to argue for a recognition of 'genius' in James Joyce and Marcel Duchamp, not sufficiently aware his continued privileging of the term participates in a mythology of artistic production summarised by Whitney Chadwick as the 'extraordinary (usually male) individual's solitary struggle for artistic self-expression.'³⁹ Griselda Pollock restates Chadwick's sentiment, describing how 'creativity has been appropriated as an ideological component of masculinity while femininity has been constructed as man's and, therefore, the artist's negative.'⁴⁰ What alternatives were there to this hypermasculine idea of genius, its implicit emphasis on gender as well as its explicit investment in individual talent and will? How might women clear space for their own efforts, while also supporting and furthering the work of their fellow women artists?

The diverse practices that made up modernism actually offered some possible answers to these questions, as, according to Claire Battershill and Alexandra Peat, avant-garde work in particular lent itself 'intuitively to collective efforts by being inherently or necessarily collaborative kind of aesthetic production.'⁴¹ As a result of this compatibility, collaboration has been positively connected to modernism's 'rich tradition of interdisciplinarity,' and Gluck and Spry's work together was a prime example of this phenomenon, enveloping traditional oil painting, flower arrangement and interior design. If modernism and collaboration are regarded as natural allies in certain circumstances, and women are especially primed to make use of their connection given their historical exclusion from models of individual genius, then one might also contribute an additional, troubling modifier to this partnership of gendered intersubjectivity and modernist interdisciplinarity. Wayne Koestembaum describes collaborative works in coyly queer

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Whitney Chadwick, *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 3.

⁴⁰ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (Abingdon Routledge, 2003), 30.

⁴¹ Claire Battershill and Alexandra Peat, 'Introduction: Modernism and Collaboration,' *Literature & History*, Vol. 28, No. 1, (2019), 3.

terms as ‘promiscuous and unnatural.’⁴² Koestembaum’s remark frames collaboration as at once perverse and productive, a channel for queer intimacies and a queer alternative to reproduction. These works are ‘promiscuous’ in the sense of transgressive, because of their unravelling of patriarchal ideas about how creative production should function, and in the sense of expansive, as the product of an uninhibited movement between subjects, worlds and forms, and in the sense of pleasure-centric, taking desire (whether that be erotic or intellectual or otherwise) as their condition of possibility.

Gluck and Spry’s collaboration originated through another woman modernist design pioneer. Prudence Maufe, an interior designer who developed a signature style centred around spare muted interiors, and who in 1939 became the first female director of furniture shop Heal’s, introduced Gluck and Spry in 1932. Maufe asked Spry to supply Gluck with one of her signature arrangements to paint. The encounter between these three women, sealed by a white velour feather enclosed by Maufe, was not an offhand intimate moment, but a calculated instance of queer artistic network formation, a process which mobilised desire in the service of connection, experiment and community building. Jasmine Rault argues that in being ‘concerned with the creation and regulation of modern bodies and subjects,’⁴³ architecture and interior design were ‘a critical site for the regulation and contestation of sexuality,’ and as practices they therefore drew into their fold women interested in the queer metropolitan subcultures first described by Shari Benstock as ‘sapphic modernism.’⁴⁴ Maufe’s introduction of the women offers a glimpse of the social contours of art and design in interwar London as it was practised by queer women, constituting a single gesture amongst a complex world of commissions, acquisitions and creative dialogue, professional alliances and sexual intimacies. Gluck had painted enough floral works that Maufe knew to commission a painting in this genre, but they were not at this point a

⁴² Wayne Koestembaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1989), 2.

⁴³ Jasmine Rault, ‘Designing Sapphic Modernity,’ *Interiors*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (2010), 30.

⁴⁴ Shari Benstock, ‘Expatriate Sapphic Modernism: Entering Literary History,’ in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, ed. by Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 198.

particularly well-known or celebrated output. What was it, if not an affinity in theme or subject, which struck Maufe as productive about a collaboration between these apparently very different women?

Spry's origins, unlike Gluck, were humble. As Deborah Rye Suggs explains, after a middle class upbringing in the midlands, 'Spry worked as a professional health reformer, lecturer and writer with Lady Aberdeen in her campaign to improve the lot of the rural poor in the west of Ireland and revive the Home Industries.'⁴⁵ Spry's early life reveals a woman omnivorous in her talents and interests who was eager to conceptualise and circulate theories on how to improve women's lives, and through everyday means: through advice about health and hygiene, cooking, cleaning and decorating. Spry later left a career as a teacher of home economics as well as an abusive marriage to open her first shop in an unfashionable district near Victoria station in 1928. By 1934, however, her fortunes had changed, and she employed seventy people at her shop on South Audley Street. Spry was industrious and political in her practice in ways that the often complacent Gluck was not; indeed, it was Spry's fame, rather than any shared social conscience, which drew the women together. As Sugg Ryan states, 'for nearly thirty years Spry had a marked influence on the British home and garden through her books, demonstrations, broadcasts and courses.'⁴⁶ Widely circulated through newly popular lending libraries, her books championing home florists directed women of diverse class backgrounds on how to add personal style to their homes. Their mass appeal was derived from the fact that a large disposable income, in Spry's vision, was no longer a necessary precursor to domestic creativity. At once, Spry – in part through her wealthy and networked second husband – was working within high society and royal circles that saw her decorating the home of Cecil Beaton, providing arrangements for the wedding of the Prince of Wales and Wallis Simpson, and lining the aisles of Westminster Abbey

⁴⁵ Deborah Sugg Ryan, 'Constance Spry: A Millionaire for a Few Pence,' *Home Cultures*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (2005), 124.

⁴⁶ Deborah Sugg Ryan, 'Towards an Uncensored History of Design: Ideal Homes and Constance Spry at The Design Museum, London' in *Design Objects and the Museum*, ed. by Liz Farrelly, Joanna Weddell, Leah Armstrong (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 52.

for Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. Prior to meeting Spry, few models existed for Gluck that suggested flowers were anything but signifiers of conventional femininity, heralding a drudgery particular to the marital, familial home. Yet through Spry's pioneering work, flowers were connected to independence, industriousness, resilience, professionalism and the intellectual advancement of women, and to a sphere of business interests rather than the domestic world. In more practical terms, Spry's high society circles offered opportunities for exhibition, sales and commissions, and made up for a social lack Gluck felt from possessing few friends from art school, having left St. John's Wood Art School feeling deprived of intellectual stimulation, cultural capital and professional contacts. Although, as Martin argues, 'Hampstead in the 1930s was a centre for left-wing artistic modernity,' Gluck did not fully experience the felicity of her location, rarely socialising with other artists.⁴⁷ As a consequence, Spry would for years be Gluck's main source of networking opportunities as well as her artistic inspiration.

These details all provide context for the morning in 1932 on which Spry took the call from Maufe at her shop in South Audley Street, and sent her assistant Val Pirie out to Gluck's Georgian mansion, Bolton House, with a selection of her finest anthuriums, amaryllis, arum lilies, and tulips and a Warwick vase. Gluck began painting the arrangement, but was methodical and slow, demanding a long term commitment from Spry that involved her complete orientation towards the project, insisting upon daily participation either by phone or in person. Gluck would not continue painting if any single blossom had browned at its edges, halting the entire process until Spry arrived to supply substitutes. The constant reconfiguration of the bouquet relied on Spry's intimate knowledge of the geometrics of the arrangement, her skill in balancing and recalibrating the colours and forms of the flowers in the vase with each adjustment – effectively having to put together the arrangement in a new way each time a flower required replacement – as well as a broader botanical understanding of each element's life cycle and possible duration. *Chromatic*, the painting Gluck produced out of these sittings, echoes in its

⁴⁷ Martin, 'The Individual Artist: Gluck and Modern British Art', 94.

formality and drama a form of floral portraiture, yet their working relationship did not rely upon the same binary of activity and passivity as that resemblance might suggest. Spry was no model or muse, only ever meeting Gluck's fastidiousness about the process in kind. Although, as Whitney Chadwick argues, there is an 'assumption that, given our culture's emphasis on solitary creation, one is always constructed as Significant, and the partner as Other,' both women had a stake in the essential shape of the composition.⁴⁸ Put simply, Spry shaped its content, and Gluck its form, and this allocation of creative labour would structure their collaborative works for the next four years. Even the process itself spoke metaphorically to the collaborative nature of the women's task. Gluck called the florist each time a replacement stem was required, and slowly the entire bouquet was replaced, each new flower never exactly the same as the one that came before. In this way the bouquet resembled the Argo as described by Roland Barthes: like the ship of Greek myth, gradually replaced until it was an entirely new structure under the same name, each component part of the bouquet was substituted while retaining the coherence of its original form.⁴⁹ Barthes sees the usefulness of the Argo as its status as an object 'created not by genius, inspiration, determination, evolution,' but by ordinary processes of substitution and nomination.⁵⁰ Barthes was more interested in what this vision of collective endeavour meant for the amateur, but pertinent in this instance is how this formulation deflates the individual ego and conceives of creativity as a system sustained by collaborative action and belief.

⁴⁸ Chadwick, *Significant Others*, 3.

⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (London: Vintage, 2020), 46.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*



Figure 42: Gluck, *Chromatic*, 1932, private collection

The cross pollination between their disciplines brought rigour and conceptual freshness to Gluck's understanding of still life. Through the tactile art of flower arrangement, Gluck began to consider other dimensions to her art: what if considerations of form were as salient as density, weight, scent, and texture? Through the transient nature of flower arrangement, and its responsiveness to seasonal availability, transportation and specialist botanical knowledge, Gluck began to consider more closely the often abstracted still life subjects as living and perishable organisms demanding light, water, nutrients and attention. Above all, it was Spry's radical innovations to the aesthetics of flower arrangement that convinced Gluck there was opportunity to unravel the conventions of floral still life, and to make the genre anew. Like any modernist searching for new forms and mediums with which to work, Spry sought out cockle shells, grapes, kale, and red cabbage as often as lilies and bougainvillea, mixing together vegetables and flowers, making bouquets that were playful remarks on nature and artifice, blurring the distinctions between art and everyday life. Under Spry's direction, flower arrangement eschewed conventional or simplistic ideas about beauty and function, favouring experimentation with colour, materiality and form. Spry pioneered large, mixed, asymmetrical arrangements that

moved out of the vase and onto the surface beneath, and at times more closely resemble avant-garde works – modernist sculpture or contemporary installation – than they do commercial bouquets. Spry was known to smear flowers with coloured paint; she was happy to use new materials that were considered vulgar in an interior design context that remained fixated on traditional elegance, like plastic and sticky tape. Using synthetic materials as readily as flowers, and manipulating the given natural elements, it is clear that like Gluck, Spry was interested in challenging ideas about what was natural and unnatural. When she was not using vases designed and made for her by the Chelsea Potteries, Spry sought out ‘baking tins, meat plates or junk finds,’ ‘gravy boats and birdcages’ in which to place her bouquets, a placement suggestive of an alternative existence for flowers – a kind of magical interchangeability or ontological instability – as food, waste and domesticated animals.⁵¹ As Sugg Ryan stresses, Spry even controlled the bouquets post-production, tightly controlling the photographs of her arrangements, ‘preferring hand tinting to colour photography.’⁵² Her bouquets were collages that quoted liberally from the vernacular as well as the high cultural, utilising ordinary or overlooked contemporary domestic objects alongside aesthetics drawn from 17th and 18th Century Dutch Old Masters’ as well as 18th and 19th Century flower books.

As context for what Spry was working with and against in her arrangements, it is worth considering how flowers functioned in floral artistic (sub)cultures (especially those oriented towards women) prior to the flourishing of her career. In nineteenth century European culture, in part through imprecise orientalist borrowings from Turkish culture, a trend emerged for middle class men and women in which flowers were transformed into a medium of communication with its own associated literature and norms. ‘The language of flowers attempted to make flowers capable of expressing a wide range of ideas needed to conduct relationships between the sexes leading to romance and marriage,’ Beverley Seaton explains, before describing

⁵¹ Sue Shephard, *The Surprising Life of Constance Spry* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2011), 4.

⁵² Ryan, ‘Constance Spry: A Millionaire for a Few Pence,’ 125.

how an entire popular publishing industry arose from this cultural phenomena.⁵³ Flower dictionaries, each version rarely exactly agreeing with one another, circulated these ideas to a mass female audience who made use of the languages' ambiguity and vagueness so as to express feelings that more plainly expressed would be considered vulgar, unfeminine, and risky to their social standing.⁵⁴ Although little research currently exists on how the language of flowers shaped trends in Victorian floristry, no doubt given how it shaped representations in art, literature, gardening habits, domestic crafts and interior design, as Seaton and others explore, the symbolic weight attached to individual flowers by this system was utilised in the purchase and commissioning of bouquets. Flowers acquired a resonance in the realm of language and social norms, each becoming their own form of covert, condensed text. By contrast, Spry made flowers into questions about aesthetics, and in true modernist fashion this meant shedding their linguistic or narrative possibilities. Describing the language of flowers as 'a knowledge system that has minimal reference outside itself,' Jack Goody dismisses its actual reach, and describes it as a (subsequently overblown) minor symptom of a much broader cultural trend in the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ This is what Elizabeth A. Campbell summarises as 'the Victorian's passion for plants,' which, she argues, was an 'obsession (that) pervaded every aspect of nineteenth-century British life, creating what was truly the golden age for the "Culture of Flowers."' ⁵⁶ From Goody and Campbell's panoramic view we might derive a more general point about Spry's innovations. Goody calls the nineteenth century 'the era of horticultural societies, the flower shows and competitive displays, of the universal gardener and of the literary gardener into which Tennyson invites Maude,' as well as 'when exotic flowers were reaching Europe from the East, and when the urban retail market was rapidly expanding.'⁵⁷ What underpins all the cultural phenomenon

⁵³ Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 8.

⁵⁴ See: Molly Engelhardt, 'Victorian Sélams and Talking Bouquets: Phallic Invasion of the Feminine/Floral Order,' *Tulsa studies in women's literature*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (2016), 343-363.

⁵⁵ Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 250.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth A. Campbell, 'Don't Say it With Nightshades: Sentimental Botany and the Natural History of Atropa Belladonna,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* Vol. 35, No. 2, (2007), 608.

⁵⁷ Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 232.

that Goody describes is the specificity of flowers, their lack of interchangeability. Whether they are representing the spoils of scientific progress or divine good will, pointing to women's erotic possibilities or their confinement, communicating hope or the inevitability of loss, the importance of the flower as the vehicle – as metaphor or physical medium – is assured.⁵⁸ In Goody and Campbell's inventory of examples, the flowers are always flowers first and foremost, and although they carry with them many meanings exterior to (or even unrelated to) their existence as flowers, it is hard to imagine them substituted for any other material. However, in Spry's hands the quiddity of flowers is no longer foregrounded, and they become like any other medium, akin to the other materials she freely interspersed amongst organic matter, like paint or coloured paper. In her bouquets Spry drags flowers into a field of pure aesthetics in which their role as a manifestation of nature's harmony and beauty is abandoned, and their presence is not necessarily even guaranteed. Spry's flowers are raw material without the established symbolic associations, sentiments, clichéd meanings or elevated status that accrued to flowers over the nineteenth century.

With the unexpected contrasts between found objects and floral pieces, and the dismissal of the specificity of the flowers themselves in favour of solely formal concerns, Spry's arrangements have the feel of a modernist readymade. Floristry has received almost no attention in the history of modernist art and design, and no article or monograph currently exists that specifically explores the relationship between floristry as a form and modernism. Regarding Spry as an artist of the readymade as well as a commercially successful florist is a way of inserting her into an art historical narrative that her rich catalogue of stated references supports. It also provides a framework through which to more deeply consider how her own radical aesthetics

⁵⁸ See: Molly Engelhardt, 'The Language of Flowers in the Victorian Knowledge Age,' *Victoriographies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 136-160; Marina Heilmeyer, *The Language of Flowers: symbols and myths*. (London: Prestel, 2006); Amy M. King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Shawna Ross, 'The Last Bluebell: Anthropocenic Mourning in the Brontës' Flower Imagery' *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature*, Vol.134, No.1, (2018), 218-233.

influenced those of Gluck. From 1913 onwards, to use Larry Witham's date, Marcel Duchamp began to experiment with a new form he termed the readymade: these were everyday manufactured objects recontextualised as works of art through the visionary will of the artist. Further clarifying the readymade as uncommodifiable, Witham explains that 'readymades could be ephemeral things,' using examples like 'a shovel, a comb, a coat rack, a plastic typewriter cover.'⁵⁹ Witham stresses that Duchamp's readymades – the most famous of which was a urinal titled *Fountain* from 1917 – had to centre themselves around functionality and an absence of taste, but from both the repurposed urinal and the list of possible objects Witham supplies, which are summaries of other readymades by Duchamp, it seems an additional if unspoken criteria was at play. Each object behind the readymades listed was in some sense understood as synonymous with, metonymical of or connected to conventional masculinity.⁶⁰ Giovanna Zapperi supports this stance in as much as she explores the misconception of Duchamp as a gender radical: his 'refusal of the privileged position of artist/creator/painter as well as his adoption of the feminine alter-ego Rose Sélavy, should not be interpreted as a simple renunciation of a traditionally masculine role and its attendant authority,' she insists.⁶¹ Arguably Duchamp's continued investment in the meaning of masculinity can be observed in his choice of objects for readymades, which were all mute witnesses to a set of particularly male, bourgeois practices which constituted that group's habitus: domestic duties (the shovel), grooming (the comb), dress (the coat rack) and forms of intellectual labour still considered appropriate only to other men (the typewriter cover). The urinal, moreover, is a crude joke about male anatomical function which draws together other men in a chummy appreciation of shared embodiment, while consciously seeking to shock and appal women, who were socialised to feel total alienation from their bodies and its functions. Reimagining flowers through strange alliances with ordinary

⁵⁹ Larry Witham, *Picasso and the Chess Player* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2012), 122.

⁶⁰ The single exception is *Belle Haleine, Eau de Voilette* (1921), a perfume bottle, and it is significant that Witham does not use it to exemplify the form.

⁶¹ Giovanna Zapperi, 'Marcel Duchamp's Tonsure: Towards an alternate masculinity,' *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (2007), 293.

objects, and emphasising their ornamental qualities above their prior function, Spry created forms of floral assemblage that used the language of Duchamp's radical form while rejecting its implicit assertions about femininity, domesticity and artistic value. DuChamp's rejection of taste was, amongst other things, a way of distancing artistic experimentation and ideas about authenticity from bourgeois femininity, precisely where Spry's own practice was situated. Her work exposes Duchamp's (rather conventional) underestimation of that position's possible self-reflexivity. After all, a bouquet of expensive, perishable flowers that accrue their value through the vision, touch and curation of a high society florist arguably comment upon waste, commodity culture, social status and the narrow evaluative criteria of the art world as much as Duchamp's urinal.

Duchamp's readymades were shaped by his subject position as a heterosexual male, and as such it is possible to consider Spry's interventions in the form as formulating their own queer readymade. Joanne Winning argues that queer women modernists demonstrated 'a particularly heightened concern, perhaps indeed obsession, with materials – literally stuff: paint, ink, paper, wood, lacquer, wool, chrome, steel, rubber,' and this is both true of Spry's heterogeneous bouquets and suggestive of a form of artistic production alike to or compatible with the readymade.⁶² The flowers were substances through which to explore ideas about aesthetics as much as they were ways of feeling out the specificities of certain sensual pleasures (touch, sight, smell), affective experiences which Spry's ordinary life spent passing as a straight woman did not ordinarily afford her. The fact that Spry's readymades were defined through their arrangement by hand is also significant, not only in their initial creation but in the necessary adjustments afterwards – which were part of the extended performance that constituted Spry's role as the florist – as Winning reminds us that 'the hand needs to be read as a lesbian erotic signifier.'⁶³ Just as Winning suggestively remarks of Eileen Gray's work in lacquer, Spry's readymades had

⁶² Joanne Winning, 'Love and the Art Object' in *Modernism and Affect*, ed. Julie Taylor (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 112.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 125.

covert queer implications in their reliance on ‘the sensitive skill of the hand and fingers.’⁶⁴ Unlike the conventional readymade, which is transformed by a single recontextualising act into a self-sufficient art object, each flower in Spry’s queer readymade is repeatedly held, moved around, and imprinted with her touch. Perhaps the queer readymade might be understood as continually demanding a sensual, physical engagement from maker and viewer, bringing them into close relation through this reciprocity of touch. For artists who could not take touch for granted, this emphasis possesses a passionate, liberatory, even utopian quality, and is in stark contrast to the affective repertoire of the conventional readymade, which is designed to telegraph disenchantment, exhaustion and scorn.

Spry was aware of international movements in modernism, in part due to her network of friends (including curators, collectors and artists) and in part because of direct work with the art institutions that governed the display and meanings of modernism. Elizabeth Farrelly describes how ‘Spry spent several months each year in New York,’ and on at least one occasion contributed work to a design exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, a role which, Farrelly asserts, ‘conferred an avant-garde/artistic seal of approval on Spry’s work.’⁶⁵ From this immersion in modernist culture, Spry was almost certainly exposed to readymades and their ideological attachments, as well as the swirl of publicity and attention that surrounded them. If we understand the compositions of her arrangements as reflective of a readymade sensibility, then it is a parallel only intensified by the formally striking aesthetic she chose for the official photography of her work. Working closely with illustrators, photographers, printers and publishers, Spry created images that were simple and stark in their aesthetics, and which lent her subjects a startlingly autonomous presence. According to her biographer she spent hours poring over the negative plates and prints before she was satisfied with the result. What she was aiming

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Farrelly ‘The Contentious Constance Spry,’ paper delivered at ‘Designing Women, Post War British Textiles Study Day’, hosted by Fashion and Textiles Museum and the University of Brighton, May 2012. Text available online <http://www.liz-farrelly-visits.org/2015/08/31/conference-paper-contentious-constance-spry/>. [accessed 25 July 2020]

for appears to be a further heightening of the defamiliarizing gestures at work in her choice of arrangement. Her flowers were already rendered strange through placement within a denuded domestic space suggestive at once of a shop window and a museum, and Spry then manipulated the photographs to further explore the material and conceptual issues raised by the compositions themselves. In the photographs that would form the basis of her 1934 publication on her practice, *Flower Decoration*, Spry's flowers are muscular, lapidarian, fierce and distinctly unfeminine. The photographs are monochromatic, giving her colourful subjects the look of ancient statuary, a strategy enhanced by their placement on plinths: granting the flowers a permanence not normally associated with organic matter, this strategy challenges the assumption that flowers must be synonymous with fragility, comparing them to another naturally occurring phenomena, stone. The closely cropped perspective as well as the single focus upon the bouquet – in *Kale*, for instance, no other objects are in the frame – distort the sense of scale, lending the subjects an unnerving and monstrous sense of size and animation. Under Spry's gaze flowers become ominous, dignified, otherworldly; they have the appearance of life-forms drawn from distant planets, or discovered in an archaeological dig. The unexpected energy of the subjects at once intensifies and undermines their reality. The assumption that cut plants are inanimate is challenged – these subjects live on, full of enigmatic latencies – and in the place of this biological reality are organisms with a complex animism which bring the photographs into a surreal register. Neither the flower market, the garden nor the domestic are invoked in these images, and instead what Spry creates is a kind of temple or laboratory dedicated to looking anew with veneration, wonder and awe at the basic constituent parts of the bouquet. These provocations had broader gendered implications given femininity's traditional associations with nature in general and flowers in particular, and it was this radical set of questions within Spry's work which Gluck would later respond to and fully articulate.

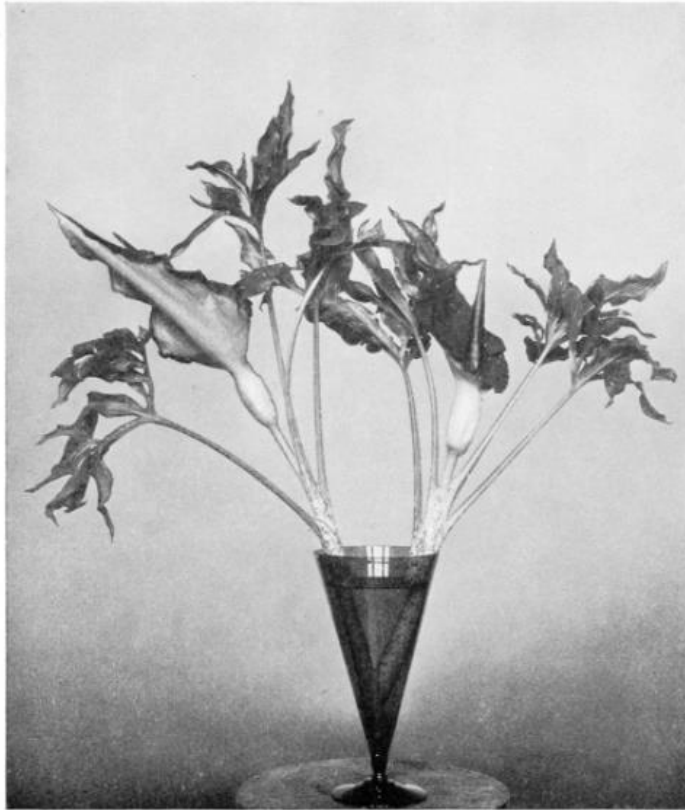


Figure 43: Constance Spry, Dracunculus, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1934)



Figure 44: Constance Spry, Pink Shell with Tulips, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1934)



Figure 45: Constance Spry, Kale, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1934)

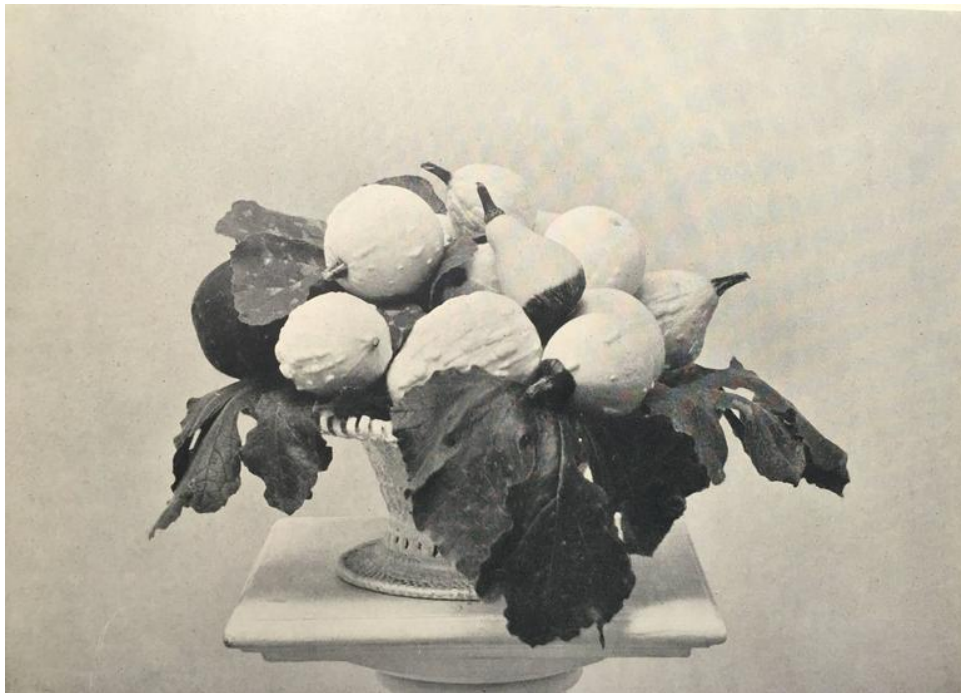


Figure 46: Constance Spry, Lemons, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1934)



Figure 47: Constance Spry, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1934)

Photography was one publicity strategy that suggested an artistic status to Spry's bouquets; another was in their display in fine art spaces, and this was where the collaboration with Gluck proved mutually beneficial. Between 1926 and 1980, Gluck developed an exclusive relationship with The Fine Art Society which resulted in her staging five solo shows there.⁶⁶ A solo exhibition of Gluck's work, which included *Chromatic* and other works collaboratively made with Constance, opened in October 1932 at The Fine Art Society. Almost a quarter of the twenty nine paintings, as Amy de la Haye points out, were of floral arrangements.⁶⁷ Always meticulous in how her works were presented, Gluck designed the exhibition room itself, transforming the entire space into a creamy white enclosure that echoed the appearance of her

⁶⁶ Amy de la Haye with Andrew McIntosh Patrick, 'Gluck and The Fine Art Society' in *Gluck: Art and Identity*, 114.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 115.

specially made frames. ‘The Gluck frame, as it is now known, was painted and constructed not to hold and emphasise art,’ Halberstam writes, ‘as much as to situate it uniquely in relation to the architecture of the room within which it appeared.’⁶⁸ Gluck’s frames stated her interest in creating a coherent aesthetic environment, a commitment which prevailed over any attachment to individual artworks or pieces of furniture, a possible metaphor for the artist drawn to collaboration over solo practice. However, there were additional reasons to lay such aesthetic emphasis on the room itself, and Rault’s remarks on Eileen Gray’s immersive domestic interiors are pertinent here. ‘She subordinated the object qualities of her furnishings to the ambience of the whole,’ Rault writes, ‘which she directed towards enhancing the room’s experiential character as lived and felt rather than conceptualised,’ and the same emphasis on feeling and experience could be applied to Gluck’s exhibition space.⁶⁹ Shallow perspectives, decorative surfaces and pale colours associated with an Art Deco aesthetic were chosen to offset Gluck’s flower paintings, and it was amongst this extravagant display of a modernist sensibility that Spry’s bouquets were placed, living versions of the images that lined the walls, an acknowledgement of everything she had contributed to the show’s conception. Spry had proven her worth as an artistic collaborator, and she would excel as a promoter, managing guest lists and invites in a way that had an enduring effect on Gluck’s career and output. The show was another rousing commercial success, drawing a diverse mixture of figures from art, theatre, aristocracy and business, most of whom were selected by Spry and which secured for Gluck a succession of new patrons and commissions.⁷⁰

The possible queer resonance of Spry’s bouquets was expanded upon by paintings Gluck produced in response to her work. What Gluck chose to splice with Spry’s aesthetics was significant. Old Master still life were, according to Spry, a defining influence on her

⁶⁸ Jack Halberstam, ‘Introduction’ in *Queer British Art* ed. by Clare Barlow (London: Tate, 2017), 2.

⁶⁹ Caroline Constant, ‘The Nonheroic Modernism of Eileen Gray,’ *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 53, No. 3, (1994), 267.

⁷⁰ Souhami, *Gluck: Her Biography*, 103.

arrangements, and while Gluck never made so definitive a statement about her own work, in a letter to her brother she confessed to dressing in dramatic tailoring to create an ‘old masterish effect,’ a strategy which extended beyond her styling and into her still life.⁷¹ Much of the basic Old Master iconography remains in Gluck’s versions: opulent flowers are centred against an opaque fabric in a vase that is as unremarkable as the surface it rests upon, every element of the painting diminished in interest so as to highlight the extraordinary subject. Where the ‘ish’ in Gluck’s phrase comes in, however – the suffix that dilutes and trivialises the hallowed term – is of more interest. Flattened and crisply outlined, and lit as though with a cascade of electric light, Gluck’s works are less explicitly alive and more avowedly contemporary than those of the Old Masters tradition. Gluck drags these paintings out of the mire of their historical context and reshapes them according to the realities of contemporary everyday life. The flowers are illuminated evenly as though by newly installed light bulbs, and it is a brightness that only emphasises how their surroundings are implausibly pristine, cleaned by a team of domestic staff with strategies shaped by changes in ideas about public health, in possession now of increasingly efficient methods for maintaining rigorous everyday hygiene.⁷² In other words, Gluck’s still life remain fixated on wealth, inheritance, consumption and their flagrant exhibition, but show how these enduring values function through and alongside the developments of the new century.

However, these generic themes and their implicit ideological charge might not be as conservative, or as overdetermined, as they at first appear. The choice of Old Masters paintings as her central imaginative resource, along with the affective identification implied in the desire to both paint and style herself in the genre, suggest that Gluck might be considered as engaging in what Elizabeth Freeman calls ‘temporal drag’.⁷³ A form of ‘corporeal and sartorial recalcitrance,’ as Freeman has it, this form of self-styling is about hearkening back to another historical period

⁷¹ Ibid, 43.

⁷² Melba Cuddy-Keane, Adam Hammond, and Alexandra Peat, ‘Hygiene’ in *Modernism: Keywords* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) 119-123.

⁷³ Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 59.

with a keen attunement to the radical potential of anachronism. Freeman's thinking is close to that of Heather Love, who discusses the relationship between queerness, backwards aesthetics, and shame.⁷⁴ Gluck's preference for historical styles appears less complexly tied up with negative affect, however. Dressing with the drama of a Renaissance painter could hardly be understood as an accurate or faithful imitation or idolatry when performed by a queer woman, and instead functioned as an embodied challenge to the ideas about masculinity and genius implicitly contained within that costume. There is an element of wilful and gleeful reappropriation, and subsequently of deflation, in Gluck's adoption of this exclusive set of styles and behaviours.⁷⁵ All the more striking is how this backwards glance functions in Gluck's canvases. Using figurative visual language and frontal compositions, Gluck lingers with the formal properties of traditional still life in paintings that imprecisely merge the impulse to cling to an imagined past and to look optimistically ahead, creating a distinctly queer intermingling of past, present and future consistent with Halberstam's definition of 'queer temporality'.⁷⁶ Halberstam's understanding of this temporal mode proceeds on this assumption: linearity confirms a passage towards a locatable future, hastened along by reproduction, sealed by inheritance. The past is irretrievable, and the future is a precise set of aspirations which build consecutively upon one another and bring the subject steadily towards their life's closure. Gluck's backwards facing paintings, their mining of historical narrative as well as their vexed relationship to their canonical forebearers, refuse to be carried along by this ordered narrative arc, its implications in terms of the family and the dimming of erotic possibility. Instead, these paintings break off from the generational march of time, and make a playfully virtuosic art out of a Janus-faced gaze: they look backwards and forwards, bringing the styles of the past to bear upon the trends of the present. The protagonist

⁷⁴ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 8.

⁷⁵ In this respect, Gluck's self-styling bears a resemblance to (and in the process reinscribes) Gwen John's fashioning of herself as a medieval saint, as discussed in Chapter 1. In each instance, 'temporal drag' entails gender inversion, a puckish deflation of masculine seriousness and the heady ambition of seeing oneself in a significant figure of cultural or intellectual achievement.

⁷⁶ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, NYU Press, 2005), 2.

of Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando* comes to mind, a figure who shifts historical moments and genders in a celebration of the long sweep of queer history, which is shown to rub against and inform contemporary queer embodiment. José Esteban Muñoz's remarks on queerness are true of both Woolf's novel and Gluck's use of outmoded art historical forms: he describes 'queerness as a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity.'⁷⁷ If this is the case, and the paintings themselves could be said to be formulating their own utopian ethics, then what qualities – what ambitions, behaviours, and styles – was Gluck interested in laying claim to?

Revisions to the visual language of the Old Master tradition suggest the removal of a higher power, and a movement towards an alternative world in which there is no punishment, and no retribution. Darkness is no longer relied upon for drama, and there is an authoritative glee in Gluck's decision to pull the gloomy fabric from behind each arrangement. A sheet of radiant colour emerges behind each bouquet as though driven by God's first, transformative speech act in the Old Testament, 'let there be light'.⁷⁸ Gluck is omnipotent, and in usurping the place of god, what vanishes from the genre is the fear of death. The Old Masters used flowers as a motif expressive of the brevity of all life, and visual tricks abound to draw attention to this theme. Flowers are depicted at the very edge of their bloom, the rot just visible in their slackened necks; dew glistens on petals, a punctuation indicative of a momentary pause within an ever-advancing present. These paintings were also known as *vanitas*, and stressed the proximity of human life to death in order to emphasise the worthlessness of worldly pleasures and possessions. Gluck's flowers exhibit none of these markers: they are flawless, at a remove from biological processes, as lifeless and deathless as the immaculate paint they are rendered in. In common with Halberstam, Leah Lynch argues that 'queer corporeality is deemed out of sync with the (normative) life narrative,' in accelerating the ageing of the body through certain asocial

⁷⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: 10th Anniversary Edition* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 16.

⁷⁸ *The Bible: Authorised King James Version* ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008) 1.

excesses, refusing to reproduce and – especially in the wake of the AIDS crisis – ending in premature death.⁷⁹ Gluck's flowers can therefore be understood as proposing an utopian revision to this experience of embodiment. Queer lives had been dismissed by phobic detractors as 'pathological, sterile, and degenerative,' in Lynch's phrase, and it is in this context that the abundant, invincible flowers might be considered a radical gesture, investing queerness with a new set of terms centred around invulnerability, aliveness and presence.⁸⁰ They are not heading for maturation, reproduction or death; they exist in an endless present at the height of their attraction and powers. This is a queer standpoint as much as it is a secular one. Although still close to her mother, Gluck had distanced herself from her family and their Judaism, so the religious moralism embedded into the vanitas tradition, the 'admonitory or censorious end of the Dutch still life spectrum,' in Norman Bryson's words, was simply not relevant.⁸¹ No longer answering to any power outside of herself, Gluck sought out the spiritual in expensive food and wine, antique furniture, cocktail parties, exquisitely tailored clothing, and holidays abroad with her lovers. In removing from her still life the foreboding presence of death, Gluck was formulating a dissident personal philosophy in which there was no guilt, no mandatory sacrificial violence, and no fear. In the kingdom that Gluck built across a series of canvases, flowers do not die, nothing does, because given the choice, why accept loss as natural, and if it could be eradicated, then why live otherwise?

Given their lively dialogue with art historical tradition, it is possible to see Gluck's flowers paintings as part of a broader movement dominating British art in the interwar period. The losses incurred by The First World War led many artists to reject abstraction in favour of the firm ground of figuration. The formal dynamism and explosive violence of the machine age celebrated in Vorticism no longer appealed after the horrors of the trenches, and artists retreated

⁷⁹ Leah Lynch, 'Intemperate time: Queer(ing) temporality and narrative in Nightwood,' *Women's Studies Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (2019), 85.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 87.

⁸¹ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 2017), 115.

to images untouched by those traumas.⁸² Suddenly there was a crop of watercolours focused on the countryside, the kind done while perched on a grassy knoll, pastoral visions of lush greenness and exquisite ecclesiastical architecture, all of them quiet statements on an ideal of Englishness bound up with a fear of its loss. The museum galleries left empty while artists strived to make it new were once again filled with figures hunched over sketchbooks, copying a Piero della Francesca so as feel the warmth and simplicity of an imagined Mediterranean past eclipse their unsatisfying present. Roger Fry even anticipated this trend in an exhibition of copies and translations of Old Masters paintings at The Omega Workshop in 1917.⁸³ The radical potential of abstraction, an aesthetic radicalism that had exciting ideological implications, vanished, and a nostalgia that slid easily into nationalism slowly infiltrated British art.⁸⁴ Never subscribing to the dogma of avant-garde groups, Gluck had only ever dabbled with the principles of abstraction. Her paintings never resembled those of her peers, and even her manipulation of traditional representational forms bore little resemblance to other contemporary examples. Relatively unscathed by the effects of war, distanced from it through her gender and class position, Gluck's concerns were different. While her brother had fought on the frontline, Gluck had been engaged in her own private battle: her uninspiring education at St. John's Wood Art School.

During her education at St. John's Wood, women were still not allowed to draw directly from the nude. The principles of art school pedagogy insisted on the vital importance of the life class and the study of anatomy – the two components, alongside antique, that made up their core education – but women were only ever permitted to draw the model's head, or later, the draped

⁸² See: David Peters Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art, 1914-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Robert Storr, *Modern Art Despite Modernism* (New York: MoMa Press, 2000).

⁸³ See: Richard Howells, 'Copies and translations: Roger Fry, Old Masters and the Omega Workshops', *British Art Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (2015), 47-57.

⁸⁴ Although perhaps lacking in exploration of this movement's darker implications, see: Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010). Harris describes a coterie of British artists 'who had previously felt compelled to disguise themselves as avant-garde Frenchmen' and who 'were now to be found on English beaches sheltering their watercolours from the drizzle.' 'Drawn to the crowded, detailed, old-fashioned and whimsical,' these artists and writers (Harris focuses largely on painter John Piper) retreated from abstraction and made sentimental work that signalled a return to traditional English life.

body.⁸⁵ The Slade had pioneered women's access to life-classes, allowing women to progress alongside men in drawing from the nude, but not all schools were following suit.⁸⁶ To expose women to the body constituted a grave moral offence, even if the bodies resembled their own bodies, and even if those bodies were regarded as purely aesthetic rather than as sexual objects. Accessing the body in a demystified setting outside the strictly policed realms of the family would allow women to better see and understand themselves, a fearful form of power. 'For a woman to look upon nakedness with the eye of an artist and not simply the eye of mother, wife, or mistress,' Woolf wrote in the foreword to an exhibition of her sister's work, 'was corruptive of her innocency and destructive of her domesticity.'⁸⁷ And so still life, floral subjects in particular, became the remit of women painters who were denied access to essential lessons on anatomy. Accusations of amateurism could never be meaningfully thrown off, proven to be the misogynistic trap that they were, not if women remained unable to draw the human form, without which none of the higher genres (religious or history painting or portraiture) could be attempted. Now entering art schools in increasing numbers, women nevertheless found themselves painting more or less the same subjects as their forbearers under the same aegis of politeness and religious dogma. Without access to the nude model women could not insert themselves or their experiences into high art, nor could they have any means through which to shape its language. The withholding of this experience became an efficient way of guaranteeing women did not contest those men who had the most power and influence over the art world and its value system. Indeed, this pedagogical refusal worked just as the men of the academy intended. Women's skills flourished only to hit a wall. Gluck, like many of her contemporaries, had learned in depth how to draw flowers while the intricacies of human anatomy went relatively unexplored.

⁸⁵ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1992), 46.

⁸⁶ Delia Gaze, Maja Mihajlovic, and Leanda Shrimpton. *Dictionary of Women Artists*. (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), 84.

⁸⁷ Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf, *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell, with a foreword by Virginia Woolf* (London: The London Artist's Association, March 1930)

Gluck's rage against those years affects her flowers like a sudden surge of light, a chemical in the water, a pollination with a different species: it transforms them. Gluck uses a hyper-real figurative aesthetic that clearly specifies the flowers are flowers while also making reference to the most erotic zones of the body. The paintings obsess over flowers with the feel of skin, flowers that have done away with every last garment, flowers that ask to be touched, flowers that allude to taut muscles and the tissue underneath, flowers that resound with the hum of blood through its vessels, flowers that feel out the shape of organs, flowers that study the body's darkest crevices. Exposing the body through the very genre used to deny women access to their own bodies was a fitting act of defiance, and it was funny too, exposing the absurdity of excluding women from anatomy lessons. The lurid physicality of the flowers mocks the faith in the efficacy of these tactics, as though a few anxiously placed sheets of fabric in the classroom would forever deter women from removing their clothes before a mirror and learning the basics themselves. Or asking questions and exchanging information with their mothers, sisters, and friends. Or going to a library and checking out a book on anatomy. The acquiescence, ignorance and silence expected of women is revealed, ridiculed, and rejected outright.

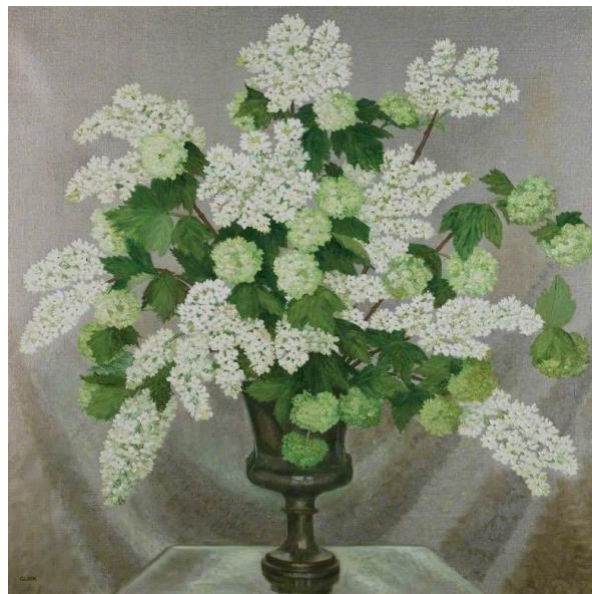


Figure 48: Gluck, *Lilac and Guelder Rose*, c. 1930s, Manchester Art Gallery.

Being restricted to still life not only restricted women's talents, but also involved them in creating and circulating propaganda that promoted an ideal of femininity that was passive, ornamental and frail. Gluck responds to these impositions directly. Femininity is invoked only for its associations to be subtly transformed. In *Lilac and Guelder Rose*, an undated work from the thirties, the intricately detailed visual language frames femininity as pretty and sweet, laboriously constructed, skilled and elaborate; beauty and complexity are not regarded as mutually exclusive. In *Lilac and Guelder Rose* there is no waste, nothing that is not there after much deliberation. The social experience of femininity for so many women involves understanding themselves as essentially disgusting and abject, replete with unwanted emotions and physical events, or 'polluted' as Anne Carson conceptualises it in her essay tracking negative representations of women and dirt since antiquity.⁸⁸ Given this context, the revisions that Gluck made to the form, how utterly loved, idyllic and flawless femininity becomes, are all the more radical. After all, Gluck understood the hidden complexities of conventional femininity from experience. Outwardly ordinary – even, given her profession and social circles, a little prim – Spry was in fact gifted, sensitive, and conscientious, and bold enough to plunge into a love affair with Gluck while accepting all the risks that came with it. When a vicar made a disparaging remark about Gluck's dress when the couple were in a tea room together, Spry leapt to her defence, following the man out onto the road, making the confrontation public and her alliance with Gluck unequivocal.⁸⁹ Spry only reiterated her willingness to protect Gluck and to make space for her transgressions through commissioning designers to make daring new clothes for her, including black chiffon culottes made by Elsa Schiaparelli.⁹⁰ The flower paintings capture the honour and fortitude that Gluck invested in Spry's femininity, and in their own covert way they also record

⁸⁸ Anne Carson, 'Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity' in *Men in the Off Hours* (London: Jonathon Cape, 2000), 130.

⁸⁹ Souhami, *Gluck: Her Biography*, 38.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

how Spry herself resisted and reworked the expectations and moral standards that came with her gender, both as a professional woman and a romantic partner.



Figure 49 & 50: Gluck, *Lilies*, 1936; *Convolvulus*, 1940, Private Collections.

The redefinition of femininity in *Lilac and Guelder Rose* was only one part of a broader project interested in bodies and identities, and the scant available means of representing them as a painter working within a patriarchal art historical tradition. Bypassing the dreary and habitual objectifications of the nude, Gluck also decided against portraiture, its optimistically simplistic use of the body as a transcript of character, opting instead in her flower works for something entirely new: an attempt to convey the visceral, sprawling experience of embodiment. With their emphasis on recurring shapes, precise movement, and opaque patches of colour, these works are about reproduction, the ubiquitous and unending processes that underlie it, and they are about boundaries and flow – of blood and water and breath and hormones – all the growths, losses, and equilibriums unfolding across networks of interconnected systems that constitute the foundation of our lived bodies. For Gluck, flowers were not ideological objects designed to reify

the feminine, but were rather, to use Matthew Fuller and Olga Goriunova's description, painted so as to express something more universal about physiological existence, to 'embody variation and unfolding, vigour and decay.'⁹¹ These energies, with all their dynamic and knotted and mysterious force, were what the traditional nude did not acknowledge, and they are not only explored in Gluck's flower paintings independent of any particular self, but also – and more radically – of any single gendered body.

Elizabeth A. Campbell describes how in nineteenth-century discourse, 'women and flowers were connected more inextricably than they had ever been before, and that this connection has everything to do with sex, mating and reproduction.'⁹² Molly Engelhardt agrees, writing that the partnership of femininity and flowers is deeply rooted in the cultural imagination and in the symbolic economy of patriarchy.⁹³ Gluck addressed and upended this particular connection across her work. Gluck's flowers borrow terms from the masculine and feminine, never bothering to heed anything so banal and restrictive as the binary system of gender or sexual difference, and instead naturalise an environment in which the connection between bodies and identities is complicated, slippery and expansive. Botanical classification systems continued to be shaped by the work of eighteenth century botanist Linnaeus, who proposed that the reproductive parts of plants paralleled the sex organs of animals, and extrapolated from this a taxonomy in which plants confirmed the naturalness of binary gender, sexual dimorphism and heterosexuality.⁹⁴ The botanical thinking Gluck engages in through her flower paintings so thoroughly ignores the essentialist dint of this discourse that it borders on direct ridicule. Gluck's 1936 *Lords and Ladies* is a study of arum lilies which is careful even in its title to state an ambivalence about the subject's sex and gender. Their resemblance to eroticised parts of the

⁹¹ Matthew Fuller and Olga Goriunov, *Bleak Joys: Aesthetics of Ecology and Impossibility* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 36.

⁹² Campbell, 'Don't Say it With Nightshades: Sentimental Botany and the Natural History of *Atropa Belladonna*,' 610.

⁹³ Molly Engelhardt, 'Victorian Sélams and Talking Bouquets: Phallic Invasion of the Feminine/Floral Order', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (Fall 2016), 345.

⁹⁴ Amy M. King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14.

body is so explicit that Gluck herself addressed it, careful to reverse the most habitual of assumptions. ‘How can these flowers be female?’ Gluck wrote, ‘anything more male than this prominent feature I cannot imagine.’⁹⁵ In claiming the flowers as phallic, Gluck takes aim at received ideas about the natural world, how they are closely correlated with the myths about sex and gender that had plagued her entire life, and how those fallacies ultimately translate into a narrow way of seeing that can only reproduce clichéd representations of nature. Gluck is sure not to repeat these mistakes. Across the flower works, symmetry breaks down to reveal slight deviations. Rather than work with an idea of physiology that is entirely fixed and predetermined, Gluck was careful to frame her flowers as a mixture of patterns and spontaneous gestures, constructing a model of nature in which there is room for difference, non-dualistic thought and the possibility of resignification. Although the remark might appear small and offhand, the notion that anatomy is destiny and gender is natural, the coherence and stability of which so many other oppressive principles relied upon, is through *Lords and Ladies* challenged and dismantled. Rigid sex and gender binaries dissolve in a new kind of classification, one not based on aesthetic or social norms, nor on a strict divide between human animals and their environment, but on recognition, sympathy, and belonging.

Epilogue: In the Gluck Archive

Writing about Gluck and Spry’s collaboration was complicated throughout by the absence of primary source material. Gluck destroyed most of her personal papers, including all correspondence with Spry when she met the writer and society hostess Nesta Oberma in 1936, the woman who would replace Spry and captivate Gluck for the rest of her life. What survives of Gluck’s letters, sketchbooks and commonplace books is not held at an institution, but stored in the garage of the Gluckstein family, a space which also serves as a miscellaneous storeroom.

⁹⁵ GA, Gluck to Nesta Oberma, undated (1936).

Heaps of plastic children's toys, garden furniture and empty cardboard boxes emblazoned with champagne brands surround the single filing cabinet which constitutes the archive. No environmental controls appear to be in place, and on the summer's day I arrived the city was boiling hot, and this unventilated, dimly lit and untidy room almost unbearably so. Obscurity, difficulty and discomfort, which amongst Gluck's archival material are experienced to an almost comic degree, are broader epistemological conditions that shape the queer archive, an issue I will discuss at length in the next chapter.

Amongst Gluck's sketches, there is a series of written plans for the flower paintings: as mediums for conceptualisation and documentation, in them countless works are distilled. During their relationship, Gluck accompanied Spry on professional excursions to country gardens, both women taking notes on samples and cuttings, and the breadth of material in the archive suggests that this working habit endured. In some the bouquets themselves are loosely drawn, then deconstructed like a diagram: these dissections trace the passage of thought into action, and pause at a stage of Gluck's process where the endpoint is still unforeseeable, the finished painting pure potential. A few sheets pluck a single bud from the bouquet and bring it to life in watercolour, adding commentary on colour that adjusts what is visible into its most ideal form. These descriptions are instructions to herself, the seed for future works, and they are explorations of the limits of paint, aspiring to a granular precision in colour and form that for Gluck the written word more robustly guaranteed. Writers and painters alike are prone to seeing their own medium as inexpressive, longing for the alternative. 'Words are an impure medium,' Woolf wrote in an essay on Walter Sickert, but for Gluck 'the silent kingdom of paint' was not enough.⁹⁶ Notes on the ineffable and the miniscule, what for her fell outside the remit of the visual, surround the flowers: 'white edge and lips; faint yellowing; white with fine blue purple lines'.⁹⁷ These corrections refocus the paintings as though with a magnifying glass, encouraging a

⁹⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'Walter Sickert: A Conversation', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume 6: 1933-1941* (London: Random House, 2011), 236.

⁹⁷ GA, 'Sketch of an Arrowhead'.

closer look at each petal, an attention to the gradations in tone that underlay even the most matte applications of paint. Some plans are composed solely of passages of text, and move beneath the refined surface of *Chromatic* and its many counterparts to a realm of murmurs and mumbles, and everything language cannot contain: erratic scribbles, sweeping lines and pensive dots all rendered in smudged pencil. These documents expose the deceptions of Gluck's sleek aesthetic, her apparent obsession with surfaces, and reveal the inner life of these paintings as bursting with labour, thought, knowledge, discrimination, accuracy and detail.

These texts were not the only working documents for the flower paintings. In the archive, the flower drawings are stored inside and alongside a vast supply of material suggestive of the rich and varied ground from which the finished works were drawn. Out of images from newspapers and magazines, quotations and phrases cut out or copied onto scraps of paper in pen, technicolour advertisements, and fragments torn from religious treaties, Gluck conducted complex acts of cross-pollination from which she cultivated her singular flowers. The material reveals how each work was a complex act of compression, tethered to the real world not only through Constance, references to her work and their relationship, but through a composite of intellectual and emotional resources. The unexpected lyricism and sheer range of this supplementary material adds further nuance and depth to the paintings, and even a small sample of it reveals how experiences like redemption, struggle and happiness all contributed something to the flowers' subterranean life. Saint Teresa of Avila articulates in biro a spiritual intensity that intermingles with the hurriedly reproduced words of Vincent van Gogh, his remarks on creativity and suffering undercut by the simple joy of an elephant in expressive charcoal, a reproduction of a Rembrandt drawing ripped from a newspaper. The sudden accumulation of new voices felt eerie sat before the mass of papers in the archive, as though I were suddenly attuned to a frequency at which the works could be heard whispering. And what they communicated was this: collaboration and creativity alike are messier than an artist might like to admit, fraught with insecurities and errors and unseemly convictions, whirring with private

questions and compulsive analysis, and however hard they try to make it appear otherwise, somewhere that reality is archived.

3.5: Winifred Gill, *Notes of Stories to Tell* (c.1920s)

If you were to visit the Omega Workshops at 33 Fitzroy Square, London during the years of the First World War, Winifred Gill would almost certainly have been there – bent intently over a pattern at the table, wearing one of her prized collections of pretty blouses, or guiding customers in the showroom towards a purchase suited to their needs.¹ Gill began working at the studios shortly after they opened in July 1913, and was involved in the business until it closed in 1919. Her aim was to link fine and decorative art so as to demonstrate to the general public that artists could design items of practical and general use. It was a vision drawn from Omega's founder, artist and critic Roger Fry, and co-founders Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant.

In November 1910, when Gill was still largely known to him as his children's babysitter, Fry opened his controversial exhibition 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists', at London's Grafton Galleries, and shattered the norms of the Edwardian art world. Manet's works provided an anchor to tradition for the more sceptical amongst the show's audience, revealing links between earlier Impressionism and the more radical aesthetics of Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin, as well as more recent work by Matisse, Picasso and Derain. No women artists were included in the first Post-Impressionist exhibition – despite the profile and output of Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, to name the most obvious examples. However, the modernism that Gill explained and created through Fry's project advertised itself as rooted in ordinary domestic objects, through ashtrays, inkstands, letter-weights, jam pots, cruet stands, salad bowls, and jugs. The business Gill managed set itself defiantly against the ideology of separate spheres that had excluded women from cultural production, and did so not only by taking special interest in these everyday things and the routines they necessarily described, but by elevating decorative art practices (ceramics, textiles, wallpaper) long considered minor precisely because of their association with women. Gill's work with Omega was a striking intervention, an attempt to put

¹ BO: Diaries, MS 6241, A.2.

the defining concerns of modernism within women's reach.

Gill ran errands. Gill took calls. She compiled what was known as 'the bank of designs', the collection to which Omega artists contributed their work anonymously. Gill did the accounts, an important aspect of which was paying the artists: working for the Omega Workshops promised a small regular wage, a policy which appealed to many in Roger's circle, and which was established after hearing that Duncan Grant had missed a portrait commission because he did not have the fare for a bus from London to Guildford. Gill stood at writer Arnold Bennett's side as he inspected a candlestick. She helped W. B. Yeats pick out a large green pottery water cooler, which he then took away in a rucksack.² At the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1912 she stood next to Vanessa Bell, feeling 'very lost and low', overwhelmed by the changes heralded by the art on show and what it meant for her own burgeoning practice – only for Bell's infant son to take her hand and kiss it.³ She took a nap while Wyndham Lewis tried on a new hat before a mirror, and woke up in time to catch him posing with an extravagant air of self-regard. Lewis remained unaware of her watchful presence in the dark, for Gill was practised in making herself invisible.⁴ She arranged herself next to Nina Hamnett – vibrant silk pulled over Hamnett's old wool jumper, an oyster-coloured cloak just covering her walking boots – the women smiling at one another rather than the camera before them.

Gill rarely gets credited for her immense contribution to the Omega Workshops; for many she was simply a shop girl. 'I served as a connecting link,' Gill herself insisted, accustomed to underplaying her role.⁵

Gill responded to the name Winnie, although later admitted to never liking it. She rang through sales and wrote up receipts. Gill worked through designs for a cloak with Bell, carefully

² BO: MS 6241/38, Folder 1, WG to DG.

³ BO: MS 6241/38, Folder 4, WG to Quentin Bell, 15 April 1967.

⁴ BO: MS 6241/38, Folder 1, WG to DG.

⁵ Ibid.

sending back alterations, responding to critiques, offering solutions: raise the hem, fold the collar just so, add a tassel to the sleeve. Though in possession of ‘a lot of the rather boring routine jobs’, Gill nonetheless acquired a central role in the project, becoming an expert on ‘who designed, who made, who painted, and who bought’ what at Omega.⁶ She was the project’s eyes and ears, and later a kind of archivist, a repository of memories and a historian of the Workshops’ transformative years, who would be called upon for that information for decades to come.

When she went home at night, Gill would continue with one of her own watercolour still lifes, or add further texture to a pastel drawing of the countryside. Folders full of her works reveal Gill’s imagination to have fixed with great intensity on projects outside of the Omega Workshops. She was fascinated by ecclesiastical architecture, manor houses and show gardens. Women fill page after page of her sketchbooks. Figures are sketched in life-drawing exercises from her year at the Slade School of Art, the time constraints rendering them anonymous, flashes of pure physical form. There are sheets of surreal illustrations for children showing little creatures with bulbous heads and bird-like legs inspired by the fantasy bestiaries of Pre-Raphaelite art. ‘You’ve very nearly done what we are all trying to do,’ Roger Fry said of a work Gill showed him, dated 1917, according to her own proud annotation on its underside.⁷ Sweeping, geometric lines assemble a girl engrossed by a book, and she is not as fragile she seems, sculpted from the same material as the patterned chair behind her – hard as chiselled wood, all the motion in her body instilled into a cascade of hair.

Gill’s sketchbooks are startling in their creativity and range, but her talents were not enough – or this was the implication at least in Fry’s advice to her to pursue craft rather than fine art. Although Fry valued craft enough to dedicate years of his life to advancing its seriousness as a practice, and he was aware of her family’s worries about affording art school, the carefully

⁶ BO: MS 6241/38, Folder 4, WG to Quentin Bell, 6 May 1967.

⁷ BO: MSS 6241/37, Folder 1.

worded letter he sent to Gill's father insisting she set aside her dreams for more practical ambitions was partly shaped by a bias, conscious or not, against women as artists. Gill was accepted to the Slade, and attended part time, but Fry's judgement of her potential stuck; her own art practice always remained secondary to her work at the Omega Workshops. Her significance within the canon of English art might have been very different.

A collection of Gill's larger watercolours, rolled up for storage purposes, are now fixed in place as cylinders of coloured paper, each one impossible to lay flat, their laboriously produced images inaccessible. More like sculptures than drawings, these works radiate defiance.

Disinterested in posterity, they insist on not being looked at.

Roger Fry was delighted to hear of Gill's engagement in 1917, although it meant accepting that she would not be involved at Omega in quite the same way. 'I don't know how it could exist without you,' he admitted.⁸ By this point Gill was the shop manager, and entirely absorbed by the role. As Fry's remark predicted, the Omega Workshops did not continue much longer once Gill married: after floundering for a couple of years, in 1919 there was a clearance sale and the following year they closed completely.

Gill reported to Fry all the gossip at Omega, but often in separate letters to those that dealt solely with her own affairs, at his request. Fry knew that Gill saw everything – the minutiae of the shop's practical affairs as much as the emotional complexities of their customers – and wanted to preserve that vision. The story she told of watching Wyndham Lewis admiring himself in the dark was typical: the artists that surrounded Gill exposed to her their most private selves, too absorbed to catch her watching. 'I was never, in his opinion, worthy of notice,' she said of Wyndham Lewis.⁹

Rarely was Gill laid bare in the same way. What was she thinking while she worked at her little table? Her early journals are tidy narratives of her social calendar, following shopping and

⁸ BO: MS 6241/37, Folder 2, RF to WG, 3 June 1915.

⁹ BO: MS 6241/38, Folder 1, WG to DG.

sketching and taking tea with friends, occasionally bored by the low stakes of her strictly governed world – her voice decorous and at times lightly satirical, no doubt inspired by her reading of Jane Austen. Typical was a morning spent ‘wood-cutting, reading *Pride and Prejudice* and washing my hair’, each exercises in self-improvement which entailed an attention to aesthetics.¹⁰ As Winifred grew older, the journals fill up with complicated accounts of her dreams and their symbolic charge, passages from theological tracts, and admiring accounts of female mysticism and witchcraft, all of it concerned with what it was as a woman to live with and through spiritual extremities. Ecstasies and practicalities naturally coexisted in Gill’s studies. Other exercise books move through potted visual histories of furniture; most interesting to her were objects used by women to juggle maternal work with household management. Notes on cots and kitchenware eventually become a much broader project chronicling the global history of pattern design, the thesis of which radically departed from Eurocentric conceptions of decorative aesthetics. The young girl accustomed to her insular middle-class lifestyle and its dreary demands on her time and energy can be observed turning from those knowns, and transforming into a woman with voracious intellectual and artistic interests. Yet very few people discovered any of this in Gill. During her numerous visits to the shop, Virginia Woolf said nothing to her, only fixed her with ‘an unblinking gaze’.¹¹ In her diary, Woolf dismissed a nameless shop assistant at Omega – almost certainly Gill – as ‘a foolish young woman in a Post-Impressionist tunic’.¹²

Like many quietly ambitious women of her time, Gill kept notebooks full of copied-out passages from her favourite books, grafting together an education and identity from the material at hand, and while some of it was classical scholarship and theological work authored by men, much of it was drawn from the radical philosophical tradition of female spiritualism. Gill was formulating her own contributions to this private canon. In a notebook entitled ‘Notes of Stories

¹⁰ BO: MS 6241, A.2.

¹¹ BO: MS 6241/38, Folder 4, WG to Quentin Bell, 15 April 1967.

¹² Virginia Woolf and Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol.1, 1915-1919* (London: Hogarth, 1977), 11.

to Tell', I expected lists of events and characters, even snippets of dialogue, but instead what Gill set down were seemingly impersonal sets of instructions: on how to create furniture cream, bath detergent, and other household products; on how to make fudge, lollypops, lemon and raspberry fondant. Cleanliness and sweetness, work and reward; here some private ritual is briefly glimpsed.

The stories Gill wanted to tell were about domesticity and dailiness, the most familiar frustrations and pleasures, and the form she perfected to screen these experiences were recipes, instruction manuals and lists that constitute a series of verbal still lifes. These were notes towards the story of Winifred's life, condensed into the most ordinary domestic matter.

4: The paintings of Ethel Sands: a Queer Domestic Aesthetic

Prologue: in the lesbian archive

Painted in 1923, Ethel Sands's *A Dressing Room* is typical in both its aesthetic and its thematic preoccupations of the interior scenes that would define her career. As a space of gendered social ritual, the dressing room was the arena in which clothing that restricted women's movement was showcased, as itemised by Tara Puri: 'the innumerable petticoats, the provocative corset, the bustle, the cage-like crinoline, the high-heeled, tiny shoes, or the tight tapering sleeves.'¹ Nowhere were women more aware of the stasis of their lives, their decorative status, or the terms of their own confinement. And yet the painting offsets this sensation of powerlessness with a focus on the possible subversive use of a secluded space that was 'privileged as uniquely female' in Puri's words: intimacy amongst women. Dabs of paint bring into focus patterned wallpaper, wool throws and wicker furniture, but patches of bare board untouched by any colour or form do the work of disguise. Absences replace hard surfaces: forms disintegrate into abstraction; elsewhere the figurative idiom clearly asserts the presence of a door, a basket, or a throw. The imprecision and blur are a betrayal given the avowed purpose of the space: the dressing room suggests exposure, functioning as a place in which the lady of the house sought refuge, and privately organised herself to meet the demands of any given day. Yet there is no woman in *A Dressing Room* unravelling or adjusting herself according to the hour or need. The dressing room trades in one kind of transparency: that of openness, but this one trades in another: we see through it, and we therefore see very little. The painter ensures that the room is neat and simple and enigmatic, and in doing so insists on parts of herself to which nobody else could have access. Acts of concealment extend beyond the work's visible surfaces: another composition, even more sparse in detail – a few experimental lines feeling out the edges of

¹ Tara Puri, 'Fabricating Intimacy: Reading the Dressing Room in Victorian Literature,' *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 41, No. 3, (2013), 504.

another room – constitutes the verso of this work and represents an even more inaccessible world. In this chapter, I will explore the context in which Sands made work like *The Dressing Room*, paintings which at once daringly allude to the conditions in which intimacy between women might flourish while heavily and anxiously camouflaging the particulars of that experience. The gowns remain hung in the wardrobe, the rooms vacant, the action elsewhere; feelings must be intuited through a few folds of fabric and elegant pieces of furniture, the suggestion of other rooms inaccessible to our gaze. To understand the intensity of Sands's project, and the pertinence of ideas about disguise and disclosure to her work, aesthetic and intellectual strategies which I will return to repeatedly in this chapter, it is necessary to study the social and emotional impossibilities queer women like her faced in the early twentieth century.

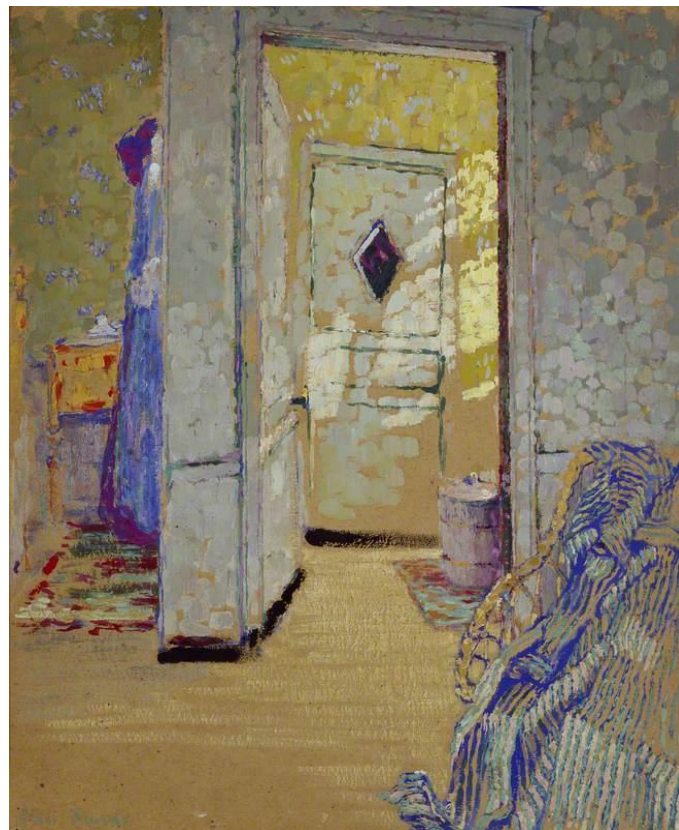


Figure 51: Ethel Sands, *A Dressing Room*, c.1920s, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

These impossibilities are explicit in the archive. For Sands's extraordinarily opaque personal papers are queered in a similar fashion to her paintings – by which I mean aligned with queer values and practices – and through roughly equivalent strategies. The stacks of letters that constitute the early correspondence between Sands and her partner Nan Hudson are all written in an impossibly contorted script, frequently rendering the texts themselves entirely unreadable.² These letters date from the 1890s, when the American women had both arrived in Paris and recently met. On each page, enough sentences to fill a single sheet advance conventionally in neatly arranged lines; however, the paper has subsequently been turned around, and Sands has continued writing – so lines move down the page as well as across, cutting across one another, creating a latticework – completely filling the page with writing while obscuring the content of those sentences. The more that is written, in effect, the more that is erased. The distinctions between reported speech, observation, and instruction are impossible to discern, especially on first look. Any sustained narrative or detailed description is inaccessible. Some letters, written in pencil and filling every available space with words horizontally and vertically arranged, are so faded that they resemble abstract drawings: landscapes submerged in fog.

To persist in reading these letters is to cease caring about finding a coherent narrative, and instead the letters disclose their meaning in the manner of fragments. Sands's letters therefore exhibit a distinctly queer textual a/effect described by Valerie Traub. 'Often represented at the moment of its passing, female homoerotic desire and contact can be glimpsed only by attending to textual edges and margins' she insists.³ Traub is writing metaphorically, but the literal displacement of Sands's text into the margins of each page makes her argument vividly material. Indeed, there are no margins in Sands's letters: crammed to their outer edges with text, the entire page is a zone of marginality in which it is impossible to distinguish personal notes, scribbles and comments from the central epistolary line of thought. Rather than figured as

² TA, TGA 9125, Papers of Ethel Sands.

³ Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18.

passing through, as Traub has it, homoerotic desire is here compacted underneath layers of private cautiousness and surface verbosity: it is stuck, buried, out of reach. Traub's work forms part of a rich seam of queer historical excavation in which queer women writers and artists are shown to have worked with, through and against silences and blockages. Those erasures that were necessary, willed and strategic, like removing a woman's name or a telling pronoun from a poem; as well as those that were unintentional, part of the precarious life of the text as a material object, such as the letters seized and burnt by family members, the censored novels and abandoned manuscripts. The result of this meeting of self-censorship and cultural erasure throughout history is the ontological dilemma famously formulated by queer theorist Terry Castle: the lesbian as phantom or apparition, a fleeting – and, as Castle's metaphor implies, unsettling and unwanted – presence almost impossible to firmly place within a text or artwork. 'Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian – even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us?' Castle wonders, responding 'in part because she has been 'ghosted' – or made to seem invisible – by culture itself.'⁴ The ambition of much queer historical scholarship is to make visible the invisible, to draw out resonances and affects which might otherwise lie dormant, and to more broadly challenge a phenomenon Tamsin Wilton describes in her account of writing lesbian history. Wilton writes:

'In a profoundly logocentric culture such as ours there is a constant process of struggle and negotiation to determine whose words are heard and whose are silenced, whose thoughts are recorded and whose erased from the record, whose truth gets told and whose denied.'⁵

This epistemological struggle, as Wilton frames it, is nowhere more contentious or explicit than in the archive, which at once houses and hierarchises these issues and comes to embody them materially. To use Jacques Derrida's memorable formulation: 'The question of the

⁴ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: female homosexuality and modern culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 4.

⁵ Tamsin Wilton, *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 50.

archive remains the same: What comes first? Even better: Who comes first? And second?⁶ What Derrida's suggestive questions mean, put simply: the existing material and ideological power relations in society robustly guarantee and maintain the production and circulation of certain knowledges, and do so through mechanisms like the archive, while ensuring the elision of others from the public record. Further, for Derrida, 'who' is a more accurate pronoun than 'what' because it stresses how it is subjectivities rather than objects or texts that are being preserved or discarded in these decisions. Who makes these choices has a great effect on the archive, as whoever is given that power inevitably recreates their own preferences and narrow experiences, and ultimately this effects a funnelling of history into a certain shape. As Tirza Latimer reminds us, 'more than a repository of objects or texts, the archive is the very process of selecting, ordering and preserving the past.'⁷ In the archive, the bias at work in formulating history is clear: entire periods of an individual's life, for instance records of certain relationships or projects, might be unavailable, unrepresented by any letter or journal; other material might reside in the archive as functionally mute, as is the case for Sands, not transcribed (as many other artists' letters are in the Tate) or otherwise made newly accessible or relevant through curatorial research.⁸ The minimal use that has been made of Sands's archive is revealed in the presence of written notes and ephemera belonging to Wendy Baron, Sands's 1977 biographer, private material for the organisation of her book which remains haphazardly scattered across the archive folders as though Baron had left moments ago for a break. Unlike material in the Tate Archive relating to Vanessa Bell, for instance – all of which is newly catalogued with high quality archival

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 37.

⁷ Tirza Latimer, 'Conversations on Queer Affect and Queer Archives', *Art Journal*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (Summer 2013), 34.

⁸ A striking instance of the former might be observed in the archive of Gwen John (Chapter 1). Overwhelmingly material in the archive records her relationship with Rodin; the correspondence relating to her relationships with women is minimal. The woman she was in love with in the village of Meudon, Vera Oumançoff, is the subject of much of her journal material later in life, that which is stored at The National Library of Wales, and arguably this could be better signposted within the archive; otherwise the assumption, supported by the available archival material, would be that these draft letters and diary entries were also about Rodin. What this has effected over the years is a gross overemphasis on the importance of her bond with the sculptor.

paraphernalia – the metal paper clips holding Sands’s letters together are deteriorated and rusted, and in some instances are rigidly affixed to the paper beneath, weakening and staining it; as a result, anything past the first sheet in a bundle of letters is practically inaccessible. Glyn Davis explains that ‘encounters with archives, that is, inevitably involve confrontations with gaps and ellipses, with fragments and ruins, whether of primary materials, documented record, or surviving memory.’⁹ ‘Queer archives are no different,’ he goes on, summarising a wealth of research on the status of the queer archive, and with pertinence to Sands’s context, ‘but their fragmentation is often exacerbated by a lack of institutional recognition.’¹⁰ Sands’s archive is especially fragmentary because of her queerness, reflective of all she was compelled to obscure or destroy in fear of detection and punishment, a loss additional to everything the ordinary passage of life tends to obscure or destroy. Further, and what Davis’s argument helps to illuminate, it has not been considered a priority for conservation work or illuminating curatorial research because of her status as a queer artist subject to (direct or indirect) phobic dismissal of her work. The rusted paper clips, therefore, with their blend of indifference and destructiveness, are a material trace of the kind of insidious phobic mechanisms at work in the archive.

However, Julia Bryan Wilson presents a variation on Davis’s point, suggesting that fragmentation is not so much an inevitable, defining quality of the archive which queer material only further invites and enhances, as it is proof of the archive’s inherent queerness. ‘Perhaps the queerest things about archives are their silences – their telling blanks and perversely wilful holes,’ she writes.¹¹ Wilson’s reparative formulation suggests an approach in which the archive is no longer regarded as in opposition to the queer subject, intent upon its destruction and erasure, but is rather a complementary organism equal to its subject in its instability, elusiveness and possibility. Queer experience only further draws out the archive’s most compelling virtues; it

⁹ Glyn Davis, ‘The Queer Archive in Fragments: Sunil Gupta’s London Gay Switchboard,’ *GLQ*, Vol. 27, No. 1, (2021), 121.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Julia Bryan-Wilson and Cheryl Dunye, ‘Imaginary Archives: A Dialogue,’ *Art Journal*, Vol. 72, No. 2, (Summer 2013), 82.

essentially helps rather than inexorably hinders. In this context, and in line with the creative and speculative archival practices proposed by a number of feminist and queer theorists, Sands's correspondence necessitates an approach attentive to these blanks and holes, seeing them as affective and intellectual points of departure, sites of hope and risk, rather than of impasse. This strategy would engage with what scholars Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch term 'critical imagination,' which seeks to make productive, poetic use of the thin material trace left by marginalised subjects.¹² 'That archive represents the straining to hear the voices that have never been heard, the attachments that cannot be given meaning,' Clare Hemmings writes of her own imaginative archival practices, 'and the utopian desire for another future grounded in a different past.'¹³ Together, what these feminist and queer revisions to archival practice emphasise is the unexpected usefulness and pleasure of work that presents epistemological and material difficulties, such as those embodied by Sands's letters, and the license researchers possess to make creative use of what *is* there, a corrective to an impulse which assumes we should ignore such material altogether for not meeting a set criteria in terms of quality and integrity. Although Sands's letters are incredibly taxing to read, they remain enormously resonant items rife with potential in terms of their bearing on queer experience.

In each of Sands's letters, the opening formalities ('Dear' 'my darling') are legible – if unrevealing in their generic address – and then words break down into abstract markings: sinuous threads of navy blue curving up and looping through themselves, ink unfurling and running on and arching and stopping. Intimations of desire flow through, and are materially embodied by these abstract forms: the hand moves carefully yet expressively across the page, and the affects associated with eroticism (care, attention, interest) are communicated through spidery words which state those feelings' essential knottiness. The letters structured like latticeworks are

¹² Pamela Van Haitzma, 'Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology for Queer and Feminist Historiography,' *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (2016), 136.

¹³ Clare Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman: feminist political ambivalence and the imaginative archive*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 8.

the hardest of all to read, as intended: a method of saving space, this design also states the privacy of these sentiments. For the practised reader of such texts, like Hudson, this contorted pattern would probably have been a shared, improvised and quickly learnt method of coding their correspondence, developed together and gradually adjusted according to each text's content and their growing closeness, a way of ensuring only the two women knew exactly what had passed between them, written or felt. Their texture was a caution, a dismissal to attempts at interception: *not for your eyes*.

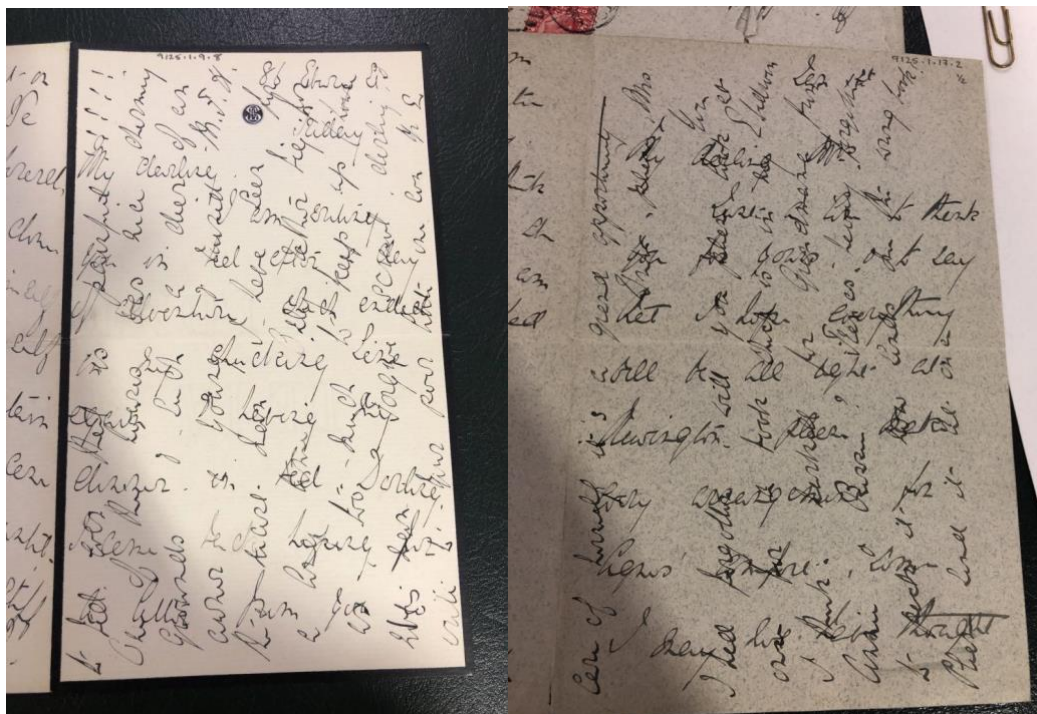


Figure 52 and 53: Ethel Sands, Correspondence, Tate Archive.

The letters insist upon not being read, but slow and arduous attention confirms that the earliest letters between the women were arrangements, enquiries about time and location: indeed, the distinct shape of the question mark was a rare, clear sign.¹⁴ The texts were therefore practical, but they were also prompts, practice, a loose affective script, a way for Sands to kindle her feeling to the precise intensity the subsequent encounter demanded. Afterwards, letters relayed

¹⁴ TA, 9125.1.5.6, ES to NH.

parts of the hours prior that deserved a permanent record, narratives which were hard to grasp in any detail but from occasional words or phrases indicative of tone (superlatives, repeated terms of endearment, the sheer length of each letter, the profound need for privacy in their texture) they were obviously suffused with feeling: erotics, affection, and interest.

At the turn of the century close friendship between unmarried white middle-class women was rarely regarded as a proxy for or conduit to desire, even when both parties used the language of romantic love. Sands was writing to Hudson within a context where their charged, passionate letters would have been seen as preparing them for heterosexuality rather than drifting them further and further from it. Laura Doan describes a society in which many believed women living with other women even for long periods of time was simply ‘innocent, cheerful and affectionate’.¹⁵ Amongst other privileged young women these expressions of tenderness normally disappeared once a husband arrived, as by then their loyalty to their husband was paramount, as Martha Vicinus clarifies, and the purpose of the same-sex bond had been served.¹⁶ Love had been safely practised, women primed for desire – and all through a bond that was considered disposable; men arrived at courtships with the ground already laid for their success. Perhaps the families of Sands and Hudson were awaiting a similar transfer of affection. Yet these letters in fact marked the beginning of an ardent romantic relationship that would never be checked by the demands of heteronormativity. Neither married; they cohabited for most of their sixty years together.

‘Dear heart’ was confident and effortlessly readable in almost every letter it appeared in. ‘I kiss you’ floated out, daring and flirtatious, in a handful of letters. The same phrases (‘I love you so.’¹⁷ ‘I long and long to have you.’¹⁸ ‘My precious heart.’¹⁹ ‘I long for you every minute.’²⁰)

¹⁵ Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: the origins of a modern English lesbian culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 17.

¹⁶ Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: women who loved women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 21.

¹⁷ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.6.1.

¹⁸ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.10.10.

¹⁹ TA, ES to NH, 9125.5.3.

²⁰ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.6.3.

were repeated with remarkable consistency over the years, flashes of sentiment within a conventional script of sociality. Longing and love and loneliness and desire and sadness and abjection are here produced as identical units, without any of feeling's particularity. Sands's formulaic style was partly drawn from the epistolary norms for a woman of her class: the recipients of her letters would have grown up reading the 'numerous books and periodical dedicated to instructing them in the epistolary arts' and together this narrow intellectual and stylistic horizon created letters from a variety of women writers hardly distinguishable from one another.²¹ Yet their flatness also constituted a further form of self-protection, akin to the inscrutable handwriting and the letters' cross-written texture. The letters present us with a form of double transparency familiar to those acquainted with the illusions of the painting that begins this chapter, *The Dressing Room*. Making claims to an openness of expression, clear as in intimate, they actually reveal very little, clear as in unmarked and contentless. Martha Vicinus reminds us that for women 'thinking, writing and confessing one's love heightened its importance, as well as one's self control,' and the degree to which Sands controlled the tone and content of these apparently frank letters – controlling her emotions as Vicinus implies, but also and perhaps more pertinently, her self-image – is striking.²²

What became clear was that the exact words were irrelevant. Instead, what mattered was how each line placed Sands and Hudson together, facing one another on either side of the clause with illegible text between them like lovers exchanging glances across a crowded room. The ambiguities common across these texts were not an attempt to say more, but were proof that what was said was of little importance. The letters were contact, as simple and unequivocal and even at times as mute as physical touch. The letters were less about their stated content than a bracketing of the women into the same space. A typical transcription of a letter was frustratingly partial and jumbled, tonally uneven, filled with uncertainties and possible errors, awkwardly

²¹ Deidre M. Mahoney, "More Than an Accomplishment": Advice on Letter Writing for Nineteenth-Century American Women,' *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 3, (2000), 411.

²² Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, xviii.

lyrical:

Painful!!!! Friday

I am writing (scowling? hurting?)

you in

feel & effort & deny

which ended

(chucking, chuckling, clicking)

feel Darling

hoping so²³

A handful of phrases inside reams of text that might as well be empty space; glimmers of feeling amongst the arid formalities, like water illuminated by a divining rod.

‘I am [...] every [...] of your precious self.’²⁴

I filled in the blanks as best I could –

There were possible verbs of relation, like *devoted*, *committed*, *besotted*; there were prepositions indicative of closeness, like *with*; there were nouns expressive of the reach of their love, like *in* and *part*.

Rather than choose complete silence, Sands became a master of ambiguity and evasion. Platonic relationships between women of her class were understood to include a variety of intensities, confessions of love included, and Sands skilfully exploited these norms, inserting

²³ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.6.4.

²⁴ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.6.2.

exactly calibrated phrases into her correspondence, and never pushing beyond what she understood as the bounds of respectability. Nevertheless, the letters and their declarations remained, in effect, a gamble. Sands trusted that the strategies she put in place in the letters, their formality and vagueness, were enough to deceive the disciplinary powers of the law and the family as to the true nature of her relationship. The risk was worth it. She would be proved right.

By experimenting with the forms through which feeling was articulated, circulated and understood, Sands's letters address issues that were central to the policing of queer life at this time. Lesbianism was understood, in a sense, to be born out of acts of expression. Prior to the twentieth century, as Jodie Medd and other lesbian historians of modernism describe, although there was no explicit legal prohibition against lesbianism, in its place a more elusive systemic proscription of female desire and gender performance sought to exclude or foreclose lesbianism as a category of desire or identity.²⁵ In 1921 it was decided that the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act would not expand to include acts of gross indecency between women. It was not the case that lesbian desire was being discounted; rather, Parliament was gripped with fear. Speaking about lesbian desire would give form to otherwise formless urges, it was believed, or would prove a powerful education in desires women need not have any knowledge of at all. Better to 'not notice them, not advertise them', as Conservative MP John Moore-Brabazon advised.²⁶ After 1921, more than ever, silence was the policy the state adopted, and was consequently what the state demanded of queer women. These women learnt to write themselves out of their own literature, lent their ciphers new and appropriately gendered bodies, and if they were artists, they noticed what was exhibited and praised and sold, and promptly erased themselves from their art. Women disappeared, or women disguised themselves and their families, or women went deeper underground with their desires. While these measures succeeded

²⁵ Jodie Medd, *Lesbian Scandal and the Culture of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3. See also: Elizabeth English, *Lesbian modernism: censorship, sexuality and genre fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Hannah Roche, *The Outside Thing: Modernist Lesbian Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

²⁶ Caroline Derry, 'Lesbianism and Feminist Legislation in 1921: the Age of Consent and Gross Indecency between Women', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 86, No.1, (2018), 247.

in diminishing or destroying certain identities and communities, it was also true – to paraphrase Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – that in completely unexpected ways they cleared the way for new ones, and transformed forever the possibilities of those that had through good fortune, or privilege, or skill, managed to survive. Laura Doan rightly argues that lesbian subculture emerged more slowly than gay male subculture, because of an intersection of sexuality and gender in which men’s freedoms (to traverse public space, to socialise with one another) were assured; at the same time, as Suzanne Raitt states, ‘the early twentieth century [was] when the modern lesbian first became visible.’²⁷ This sudden, heightened presence was partly discursive, outlined in sympathetic case-studies targeted at a cultivated audience by sexologists like Havelock Ellis. It was also visual: experienced at a sensational remove by the broader public in widely circulated images of queer figures in the throes of scandal, like Oscar Wilde and Radclyffe Hall; and through women in masculine uniform, engaged in publicly visible authority exercises and physical labour previously inaccessible to them, and necessitated by the loss of male labour in World War One. Whether scandalous or humdrum, these concrete images of queer femininity in particular made newly visible to a diverse mixture of people the arbitrariness of traditional gender roles, enabling new paradigms for identity and self-knowledge which further facilitated the possibility and visibility of lesbian selves and communities.²⁸ Because of her upper class background, her whiteness and crucially her financial capital and control over her family’s estate after her parents’ early death – an independence not guaranteed even for other women positioned identically to her – Sands was better able than most to challenge the kind of oppression represented by the 1921 ruling. However, the specific way in which her gender and sexual identity manifested themselves also placed Sands somewhat outside the remit of the newly visible lesbian subject.

In not corresponding to established models of queer desire between women, Sands and

²⁷ Suzanne Raitt, ‘Lesbian Modernism?’ *GLQ*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (2003), 112.

²⁸ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 83.

Hudson's relationship was hard to categorise both to their contemporaries and later historians, including her biographer. Neither woman adopted masculine dress – occupying the role of butch to the other's femme – and unlike Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, or Radclyffe Hall and Lady Una Troubridge, they shied away from public attention. Neither woman was flamboyant or outspoken; there were no scandals involving other women, no incriminating attachments to queer social causes, no salacious memoirs late in life. The problems implicit in these biographical details are explained by Suzanne Rait: 'if a woman does not look "modern" (in early-twentieth-century terms, read "mannish"), or if she does not act "modern" (in early-twenty-first-century terms, read "progressive"), a certain kind of lesbian criticism does not want her.'²⁹ Sands has not attracted much attention from queer historians precisely because of a conventionality difficult to reconcile with the political aspirations of queer intellectual work: her conformity to bourgeois norms, her elegant feminine dress, her discretion about Hudson, and her adherence to respectability. This lack of overt rebellion, as well as the couple's privacy, on top of a nervousness around laying claim to queerness before those social identities could be said to exist in the modern sense, means their relationship has often been defined in the same way Wendy Baron does in her biography, simply as a companionship: mild, platonic, rooted in convenience rather than passion. A number of gendered, phobic assumptions reside in assumptions like this, whether or not they were made in good faith, as no doubt they were with Baron. Central to this dogged belief in friendship rather than romance – a narrative which unhelpfully positions these states as mutually exclusive, or as binaries – is, as Gay Wachman writes, 'the myth of feminine innocence, that upper and middle class white women have no sexual desire,'³⁰ or as Terry Castle puts the same idea more fiercely, the 'condescending belief in the intellectual and erotic naivete of women of past epochs'.³¹ Harriette Andreadis insists that it has too long been assumed that

²⁹ Raitt, 'Lesbian Modernism?', 113.

³⁰ Gay Wachman, *Lesbian Empire: Radical Crosswriting in the Twenties* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 10.

³¹ Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, 9.

women in the past ‘could not name their erotic desires rather than recognising their refusal to name them’.³² Indeed, it is possible that for women like Sands and Hudson, assured in their bond, socially conservative and immensely private, it was not a matter of resistance, but of sufficiency: they simply did not feel the need to name, categorise or explain the nature of their relationship. Much of the speculation about Sands and Hudson assumes that their sexual identities or status as a couple should be wholly defined by sexual acts, counter to much theory which considers acts as only one factor within a much more complex field of queer identities and attachments, what Foucault memorably describes as the ‘homosexual way of life’.³³ Anxieties around defining their relationship all proceed from a version of this question: why presume they were lovers? No one asks: why presume they weren’t? And neither question accounts for a reality in which all the available possibilities – inclusive of friendship, love and desire – played some part in the truth. This difficulty in categorising Sands could be the reason for the complete absence of critical material on her or Nan Hudson. The biographical study by Wendy Baron – tellingly and somewhat anxiously titled *Ethel Sands and her Circle* – remains the only dedicated research on Sands, and it is a study of a social group in straightforwardly historical terms, accounting formally and formulaically for family, foreign holidays and friendships, rather than any sustained critical examination of the artist.

The rest of this chapter will address this underdeveloped critical stance on Sands, and in doing so will also provide a necessary correction to discussion of Edwardian aesthetics, which when reckoning with queerness tend to be focused on male homosexuality.³⁴ In this chapter I

³² Harriette Andreadis, ‘Re-configuring early modern friendship: Katherine Phillips and Homoerotic Desire,’ *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Vol. 46, No.3, (2006), 524.

³³ Michel Foucault, ‘Friendship as a Way of Life’ in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-84*, Vol.1, ed by Paul Rabinow, trans by Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin, 2000), 137.

³⁴ See Elizabeth Prettejohn, *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* (Manchester: Manchester, 1999); Andrew Stephenson, ‘Refashioning modern masculinity: Whistler, aestheticism and national identity’, in *English Art 1860–1914: Modernities and Identities*, ed. by David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 217–50; Michael Hatt, ‘Near and far: Homoeroticism, labour and Hamo Thornycroft’s *Mower*’, *Art History*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (2003), 26–55; David J. Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004); Jason Edwards, *Alfred Gilbert’s Aestheticism: Gilbert Amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

will explore Sands's self-conscious, imaginative and reparative representation of domestic space, and how it made room for a new visual language of lesbian desire and identity. Sands painted in ways consistent with dominant forms of visual expression in nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, but subtly altered or challenged these aesthetics and practices, and in doing so reformulated the bourgeois woman at their centre. These queer interiors address what it was and how it felt to be excluded from traditional social forms, marriage or motherhood, and gesture towards the alternative forms of affection, care and bodily intimacy that emerged out of this elected exile. In doing so, Sands's interiors bring together a range of issues already discussed in this thesis surrounding queer adaptation and the underexplored complexities of conventional femininity.

An Aesthetics of Disidentification

The curtains are drawn; for a moment, the darkness appears total. What slowly emerges from the shadows: spots of lilac, pondwater green, dirtied gold, a palette balanced between nature and artifice, and with it the creation of an exhaustive world onto itself. More: fabric that gives off static. Muffled sounds from the streets beyond: 41 Lowndes Street, Belgravia, a townhouse purchased by Sands a few years prior. The glint of lacquer. Scenes from related worlds adorn the walls: more wealth, more accumulation, more pleasure. The scent of lilies; faint pollen stains underfoot. Dust that settles on the skin, and catches in the throat. A small fortune in a single room; a grand, calculated statement about status. A taste for eighteenth-century French décor, flawlessly executed, is placed behind a locked door, submerged in indifferent dim light: its function is to impress, to express something critical about the passions of its maker, and so without an occasion to draw out its meaning the room is simply this – an abandoned stage-set, tense with expectation. Painted in 1910, *The Chintz Couch*, recalls James Boaden's definition of the queer interior, which follows Elizabeth Freeman and Heather Loves' complementary notions of temporal drag and queer backwardness, as 'one that is out of time, at odds with

contemporaneity'.³⁵ Like Gluck, Sands was interested in the opportunities for difference, eroticism and identity practice presented by historical forms. Yet this was not Sands's only strategy in the curation of a queer interior, indeed it represents only its most visible manifestation in a painting fixated on blur, illusion and misdirection.



Figure 54: Ethel Sands, *The Chintz Couch*, c.1910-1, Tate.

Everything that unfolded in the rooms that are condensed into a single, claustrophobic perspective in *The Chintz Couch* were in some sense connected to the production of heteronormativity. In the drawing room women exchanged gossip and vital information, formed alliances, arranged matches, and engaged in the critical act of displaying themselves to their peers and observing one another's performances. Sands was submerged within a social hierarchy that had furnished her with all her privilege, freeing her to travel, paint and acquire an education, but she did so as an outsider of sorts, and at a cost: it meant immersing herself in these rooms and their accompanying lifestyle. Accepting her family's money constituted a tacit acceptance of the

³⁵ James Boaden, 'Moving Houses: Jess and Robert Duncan's Queer Domesticity,' *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2, (2013), 258.

rules that governed high society, the strict, constantly evolving conservative social practices known simply – following Martha Vicinus – as respectability.³⁶ While some elements of that world were suffocating and obsolete, norms regarding desire and ambition and appropriate pastimes which were felt keenly as a limit on her own life, others were irresistible – the parties and dinners and material possessions – and most were simply too habitual to even question. After all, this was the only world she knew, and she had learnt to thrive within its limits. Respectability enclosed a set of norms that allowed Sands to move through her social world fairly anonymously – passing as a heterosexual woman of her class was easy enough if certain behaviours were learnt and reproduced – but however much she manipulated these ideas for her own gain, the performance involved a subordination of her true self. If Sands were to entirely comply with the moral directives of her class, then marriage soon beckoned. And, as Anne Higonnet reminds us, ‘artistic proficiency counted among the feminine accomplishments attractive to suitable husbands,’ but there were limits, and most upper class women taught the basics in fine arts were expected to give it up on marrying.³⁷ The unspontaneous, unsatisfying years of her adolescence would be relived with only minor adjustments, and expanded to fill the decades that followed. Above all, what Hudson meant to Sands would have to be concealed. In *The Chintz Couch*, the couch presses into the bottom edge of the frame, the tips of the skirt invisible, filling a drawing room that has been vastly diminished in size through the crop. The painting hints at the compromises that came inbuilt into the immense material privilege of the conservative upper classes, and in doing so delivers a warning: beware the lure of the opulent room, for it might prove a gilded cage.

However, the painting also explores the subtle resistance possible in laying claim to objects and spaces that do not belong to you as a queer woman, embracing that which actively aspires towards your exclusion. Popular in the eighteenth century – and by Sands’s time very

³⁶ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 18.

³⁷ Anne Higonnet, ‘Secluded Vision: Images of Feminine Experience in Nineteenth Century Europe’, in in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude (Nashville, TN: Westview Press, 1992), 173.

much in its decline – chintz fabric signalled prettiness, refinement and traditional good taste, and was therefore a symbol of the kind of conservative, elegant upper-middle-class woman who would have chosen it for the drawing room of her family home. Sands places this traditional status object within her own domestic space, and in doing so ignores how her queer femininity was not consistent with the values the material represents. She asserts her right to the furniture and space without any of the conventional domestic trappings or affective contexts that legitimise their presence: no husband, or children. The drawing room, Anne Anderson writes, reflected the best qualities of its mistress, and Sands’s interior outwardly presents her exquisite taste for eighteenth century décor as the locus of her identity.³⁸ However, on closer inspection, the room’s more vivid source of self-recognition and pride is in its framing of Sands’s quiet subversion of a social position that demanded she embody propriety, grace and heterosexual purpose, the latter of which she actively refused, thus implicitly challenging those other domestic ideals. In the drawing room, Anderson goes on, display (a compound of visibility and availability) was key in furnishing its female inhabitants with meaning, but the opposite was true for Sands, for whom more pertinent was a skilful inconspicuousness: ensuring much remained stubbornly out of sight, crucially unrepresentable or untraceable.³⁹ Sands infuses the chintz material and the entire room’s atmosphere with queer feeling but does so without much obvious change to the norm: this subtle yet decisive artifice was analogous with how she occupied her upper-class, respectable femininity. The chintz couch condenses an entire lifetime of passing as a particular kind of woman and excelling in the impersonation, enjoying it even. Anderson contends that the drawing room ‘was a staged space in which ‘character’ and ‘respectability’ were enacted.’⁴⁰ This performance is the focus of Sands’s interior, revealing how that stage might be seized by miscast

³⁸ Anne Anderson, ‘Drawing Rooms: A Backward Glance—Fashioning an Individual Drawing Room’ in *Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians to the Moderns*, ed. by Georgina Downey (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 42.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 44.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 46.

players who nevertheless expertly act out their roles, their slight adjustments in dialogue and movement and appearance working to slowly transform the given script of that space.

The ripple of sunlight dividing the room is a measure of its darkness. Only the arum lilies are immune to the shadow, and they are strangely clear-cut, as though transplanted from another painting. If the arum lilies are uprooted from elsewhere, then it is from images of the Annunciation. These scenes depict Mary's transformation into the Madonna, a process that locates the miraculous in the gap between the seen (Mary's swollen virgin body, her baby) and the unseen (the Angel, God's message, her faith). Sands's room reverberates with thought about appearances and disappearance, display and artifice, broad queer themes relating to the experience of secrecy. Yet the allusion to Mary was perhaps a more personal metaphor for Sands. From Woolf's diaries and other contemporary accounts, it seems Sands was repeatedly described in belittling terms by members of her social circle, with frequent remarks made about her appearance, age and sexlessness.⁴¹ These descriptions express great anxiety about women, desire and social role, but their consistency also suggests something about Sands's self-presentation. While Mary's body betrayed the extremities of her inner life, Sands's apparently virgin, spinster body was the sign that concealed her own spectacular act of faith: her rejection of heteronormative life and her devotion to Hudson. Much like the myths that sprang from the Madonna, Sands's self-presentation played upon received ideas about women and sexuality: women are either marked by sex or definitively outside it, no in-between; Madonna or whore. While these myths were normally used against women, to control their behaviour and set unattainable standards, Sands deployed them to her advantage. The body she presented to society did not appear to desire, and in doing so threatened no order; it was as pure and one dimensional as the arum lily placed inside her painting. Through removing her body from the

⁴¹ Although Virginia Woolf was kind about Sands in her diaries, and never spoke negatively about her in this manner, on a number of occasions in her correspondence with Vanessa Bell, Lytton Strachey and others close within her social circle she was cutting in precisely these terms in a way that suggests this idea of Sands – of her being a virgin spinster – was a shared joke amongst them.

conventional sexual economy – dressing to stress her plainness, her thinness, her dowdiness – Sands slipped free of her responsibilities as a woman of marriageable age. Mary transcended her straight, sexed body through a spiritual vocation, but Sands’s outward celibacy had more transgressive ends. To be dismissed by society as chaste, prim and unattractive was to bypass an unwanted life, and to settle into a queer one.

Sands’s queer identity construction, realised in *The Chintz Couch* through its mixture of the unfashionably demure, elegant, and prim with the subtly subversive, recalls José Esteban Muñoz’s influential formulation of disidentification. Muñoz contends that disidentification is ‘a mode of performance whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label.’⁴² Sands disidentified from conventional domesticated femininity in as much as she accepted and insisted upon that identity’s defining presence within her own life, but refused to conform to the dominant cultural expectation for domesticity to be an expression of heterosexual, (re)productive family life as experienced between husband, wife and children. To say that she disidentified from her interpellation as an unmarried woman (a spinster) is to say that she felt constituted through this unsettling set of desires and attachments, those which removed her utterly from men and their erotic intentions, but refused to live with this social estrangement (or queerness) as dominant culture demanded: with great shame and a despairing sense of her own deviance. Rather than wholly disavow the labels that were attached to her, or indeed to willingly embrace their connotations and implied horizons, Sands invested new transgressive life into the figure of the spinster and in doing so reformulated its bounds, making productive use of what might otherwise be experienced as paralysing stigma.⁴³ Without draining these identities of their

⁴² José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: queers of color and the performance of politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

⁴³ I recognise that Muñoz’s powerful formulation is written for and with radical queers of colour working in avant-garde subcultures the 21st Century. To apply his thinking to a socially conservative, white, upper-middle-class woman of the 20th Century is necessarily to change some of its implications, and is certainly to remove much of its subversive power.

‘harmful or contradictory components,’ as Muñoz phrases it, in *The Chintz Couch* Sands imagines being cast as an outsider to the heterosexual world as though it were intentional, elegant, transcendent, freeing and divine. The control implied by this position, ‘the creative agency’ as Muñoz sees it, is hinted at in the work’s texture. Paintings within painting are a signature of Sands’s work. Expecting a demonstration of skill, a microscopic recreation of an image, moving closer it becomes clear that the forms are blurred. Sands wipes her hand over the images as though they were still wet from being painted, and what is left are smudges, vague as afterimages. While each occurrence has its own distinct meaning – they often remark upon the level of light, or direct the gaze to other objects – what this trick ultimately acknowledges is the control Sands had over what people saw.

Sands was pursuing an aesthetic of disidentification, painting a domesticity that did not necessarily want her and a femininity that scorned her while remaking the limited pre-established visions of what a queer womanhood might look like. This project is further exemplified by another painting: *Interior with Mirror*. Like the fabric at the centre of *The Chintz Couch*, the mirror bears a relationship to backwardness, as a literal spatial gesture rather than a style, and therefore – to continue to draw from Heather Love’s thesis – to queerness too. ‘The verb, in Latin [...] means to “curve backwards,” or “re-curve,”’ Joyce O. Lowrie explains, ‘when we see our reflection in a mirror [...] we are projected “backward.”’⁴⁴ However, this painting possesses a more fascinating and private connection to queerness, intimacy and shame than this oblique etymological resonance suggests.

⁴⁴ Joyce O. Lowrie, *Mirrors in Texts – Texts in Mirrors* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 2.



Figure 55: Ethel Sands, *Interior with Mirror*, c.1920s, Guildhall Art Gallery.

A large pearlescent mirror is the central focus of the composition, and reflected in it is a faint outline of the surrounding room's cornicing and embrasures: what is conveyed in the pale, almost colourless image is total stillness and calm. Yet the mirror had been a complicated object for Sands. As a young woman her unusual appearance, what the mirror was forever reflecting back to her, had flung her far from the centre of marriageable high society, and while this would have been disastrous and shameful for any of her childhood acquaintances, for Sands it was profoundly liberating. The standard plot for a woman of her age and position was dismantled without even much effort or conscious rebellion on her part. There was one formal proposal, which she refused, and a few more casual attempts by men at marriage – Lady Ottoline Morrell recommended Lytton Strachey propose, for instance, although it's unclear whether he ever did – and then years passed in which there were no suitors, until enough time had passed in the absence of male attention that it was clear she would be free for good. Many saw her, or failed to see her, exactly as Strachey did. 'Suddenly observed in the extreme distance,' he wrote, acknowledging – whether or not consciously – the remove at which he was always already placed, he described her as 'dressed in white satin and pearls and thickly powdered and

completely haggard.⁴⁵ The cruelty she inspired in acquaintances like Strachey allowed Sands to concentrate only on those she trusted, presenting the exaggerated powdered façade to everyone else, wandering out of parties with Hudson when she pleased, unnoticed, even unwanted. *Interior with Mirror* is not interested in the injustice of being ignored or the emotional fallout of such vicious judgement, the inevitable pain, humiliation and diminishment of those experiences. Instead, it celebrates the covert pleasures of conducting a life in which nobody was looking. This was the joy of the peripheries, the privileges of the scorned. Sands's invisibility was not about failure, but about power.

While visiting Sands and Hudson in France, Woolf arrived at an idea for a short story. 'Ethel Sands not looking at her letters,' she wrote in her diary, 'what this implies. One might write a book of short significant separate scenes. She did not open her letters.'⁴⁶ Woolf followed through on these observations, which were centred upon communication and its failures, on shyness and sociality, writing a story, 'The Lady in the Looking Glass', centred on a woman named Isabella Tyson.⁴⁷ Sands inspired the story's protagonist, and she is present too in the looking glass, the centrepiece of Woolf's 1929 story as well as *Interior with Mirror*. In both, the mirror is a comment upon art itself, how painting and writing alike aspire to reflect reality back to the viewer. But mimesis is a slippery business: representation never quite approximates the real. In Woolf's story the looking glass holds the objects 'so fixedly', while the narrator watches these very objects subtly shimmer and darken, a disparity structured by an anxiety about the capacity of writing to capture the shifting idiosyncrasies of the world at any given moment. The 'passions and rages and envies and sorrows', or the aliveness of the room, Woolf suggests, is lost in her efforts to contain it.

⁴⁵ Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: The New Biography* (London: Pimlico, 2011), 279.

⁴⁶ Virginia Woolf and Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3: 1925-30* (London: Mariner Books, 1981), 157.

⁴⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'The Lady in the Looking Glass', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction* (New York: HMH Books, 1989), 221-5. All further references will be to this edition.

For Woolf, the mirror is a tool of surveillance, a reminder of the mechanisms of self-regulation middle-class women were subjected to even in their most private space. The mirror is a prompt to continue performing; the mirror is a mark of women's relentless visibility. In Woolf's story the narrator complains about the presence of mirrors in rooms, how irresistible the urge becomes to stop and take stock of herself, to play into the oppressive functions they are designed to perform. In Sands's painting the mirror is acknowledged, but she only ever flirts with the temptation to scrutinise or reveal herself. Her face flashes against the surface and disappears. She holds herself apart, and makes a spectacle out of that ambivalence. In this way, Sands exploits a modern phenomenon, what Isobel Armstrong describes as the ontological possibilities born out of the popularisation of the mirror in the Victorian period. 'These surfaces, recording the random, dispersed, and evanescent images of the body in the world,' she writes, 'gave a new publicity to the subject, who could exist outside itself in these traces.'⁴⁸ Sands, in a similar fashion, absents herself from her body, turning towards the mirror only to rub her likeness from its surface. When Sands steps back from the mirror, however, she transforms this apparently hesitant act into a huge rectangle of light, into a shyness that is not shrinking but triumphant, ecstatic and powerful, a shyness that resembles the beaten metal surface of a shield. Discretion, modesty, and shyness are qualities which Sands's painting refuses to frame as shameful symptoms of deviant desire, as necessary acts of concession or retreat, and instead hails them as exceptional, heroic modes of self-protection and survival.

Woolf ends her story with an act of startling cruelty. After stressing the impenetrability of Isabella, she then places her in front of a mirror, and the reserve collapses. Woolf is intent upon shaming Isabella for that which so protected the inspiration for her protagonist, Sands: her astute sense of the social, her ability to deftly navigate any given encounter, all of which is here framed as temporary and artificial relief, the kind which is disastrously inaccessible when alone.

⁴⁸ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian glassworlds: glass culture and the imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 95.

‘She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing [...] She had no thoughts. She had no friends,’ Woolf writes, implying that without the social world bolstering her existence, the shallowness and vacuity of Isabella’s life – a life which stands in for many other upper middle class women’s lives – suddenly becomes vivid, unignorable. In the story’s concluding lines, the demureness of Isabella is identified as the source of her personal depletion, her weakness and emptiness, but other depictions of Sands share Woolf’s focus while telling quite another story.

In a photograph of Sands taken by Lady Ottoline Morrell in 1920, she is posed in front of an enormous painting: it is a talisman testament to the women’s friendship as much as it is an analysis of its sitter. The hole at the top of the print suggests it spent time pinned to another surface, perhaps displayed in Lady Ottoline’s home; despite the poor quality and composition of the photograph – the scene is overwhelmed by the vast black centrepiece – it has nevertheless been preserved, possessing a sentimental value that far outstripped its status as an instance of artistic expression. The women meet one another’s gaze with ease; the centre of attention, Sands appears confident and relaxed. Yet what faults the photograph is also what makes it so unintentionally expressive. Behind Sands looms a void, a gilded frame hemming in a devouring absence, an oil painting darkened by the film’s poor exposure. Moving between this opaque, darkened surface and Sands’s mirror, a resemblance emerges, one reversing the absorption of light performed by the other. The ominous sibling to Sands’s mirror offers an alternative gloss to her talent for disappearance, as though the practice of self-effacement were more volatile and forceful than her outward appearances suggest: less a private withdrawal, a fading into the crowd, than a redoubling of her presence that was impossible to ignore. Primness is no longer synonymous with spiritual nothingness, as Woolf has it, but becomes a screen behind which flourish enigmatic intensities that defy representation or explanation. This was shyness as an obliterating vacuum into which lesser guests risked being sucked. Consider it a warning: approach the recesses of the meek with care, for they are not as they seem.



Figure 56: Lady Ottoline Morrell, *Ethel Sands*, 1920, National Portrait Gallery.

Queer Shelter Painting

Her own interiors were all Sands ever painted. This is not just coincidence, or even merely about preference, but representative of a broader aesthetic project intent upon transforming the visual language of the interior. Sands mined her own experiences for artistic material, taking inspiration from the Impressionists, who had engaged in a similar project in the nineteenth century, accessing the most heightened aspects of their daily lives in the city through depicting scenes at the opera, bars, music halls and nightclubs. Women are present – they dance, they serve drinks behind bars, they undress – but as these urban spaces were always more comfortably inhabited by men, there were limits to what roles they were assigned, and how real ultimately their representations could be. In otherwise nuanced paintings concerned with urban life, the division of labour, and the modern psyche, these women impart little else but a statement on the painters' desired dominion. With its sensitive attention to how women inhabited private space without men, Sands's work is implicitly in opposition to these representations of urban life, but she also

responds to the attempts made by her male contemporaries to depict domestic space. Francesca Berry describes how the artists who painted under the title 'Intimisme' represented the home as 'nurturing nostalgic fantasies of masculine retreat,' often instilling these scenes with a motherly affect or a mother figure.⁴⁹ Women's role shifted, familial dynamics replaced the solely erotic, but the focus on male fantasies of women's purpose remained. Not content to allow male painters sole authority over the definition and location of modernism, nor on the possible meaning of women within it, in her own work Sands moved the gaze away from these scenes of recreation and leisure, urban and domestic. While Sands shared with the Impressionists an interest in bourgeois social display and ritual, her paintings reimagine the gender, sexuality and space at the centre of the frame. Glance out the window, the hour has changed; absinthe no longer lends the room a blur; the darkened bar yields to a well-lit drawing room. Feminine coded spaces in which women could be unchaperoned were where Sands oriented herself: no streets, restaurants or music halls; even within the home, no office or library or billiard room – where men work and play – ever feature in her work. Although women feature prominently, the maternal presence has vanished; the women depicted in these rooms are young and independent, reading books or playing cards. Indeed, Sands's rooms do not contain within them any accoutrements that suggest familial dynamics or work: there are no nurseries, nursemaids or children.

In Sands's work, rooms are conventionally decorated, but the angles she paints from are unexpected, with spaces entered aslant, encountered as thick slices of glass and fabric and hard wood, leaving the viewer stranded on the threshold, our vision askew: a queer orientation prevails. As for women, aside from a few examples, they participate in these scenes without any risk of voyeurism or objectification, as unlike in either the Impressionist or Intimiste precedent – where women's function always fell under some form of service, consumption or bondage –

⁴⁹ Francesca Berry, 'Maman is my Muse': The Maternal as Motif and Metaphor in Edouard Vuillard's Intimisme', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 34, No.1, (2011), 67.

Sands refuses to allocate roles, to summarise a woman's purpose. The rooms are largely empty: Sands releases women into unrepresentable space; they circulate in the surrounding rooms and gardens, unseen. In so often depicting empty rooms, of which *Interior with Mirror* and *The Chintz Couch* was just two examples, Sands alighted upon a more subtle and sympathetic way of conveying women's experiences. Intimations of their behaviour, speech and embodiment are embedded into the composition of the paintings. Women linger as fingerprints on the objects, specks of dirt on the floor, a scent in the air, worn patches of pile in the carpet, a distant sound of laughter, the tension of a question left unanswered, a chipped edge of a cup, rouge smudged onto a handkerchief, a folded page corner in a book, a single hair on the sofa, a letter placed face down on a table. Berry describes an equivalent visual affect in Intimiste paintings as 'the imaginative sense of what it feels like to be surrounded by, to brush against and to leave corporeal traces in, the fabrics and upholstered surfaces of cramped and modestly bourgeois domesticity.'⁵⁰ Yet this 'imaginative sense' remains, in Berry's examples, more imagination than reality – as her phrasing implies – a boyish fantasy about gender and domesticity that aspires to recreate a pre-lapsarian world of maternal eroticism. By contrast, Sands renders women a material and emotional presence that is invisible to the detached observer – for men seeking out a certain kind of visual gratification, for instance – but not to someone intimate with what the painting represents: perhaps there were women who could see themselves in these empty rooms.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 62.



Figure 57 and 58: Ethel Sands, *Interior at Portland Place, London*; *The Open Door, Auppegard, France*, c.1920s, Guildhall Art Gallery.

Inspired by French art, Sands's representations of women's spaces were also in dialogue with English modernism, or more specifically Walter Sickert, who she and Hudson met in 1906. Sickert, with whom the couple embarked upon a friendship, objected to Sands's work in part for concerning itself with 'the drawing room' rather than 'the scullery', a distinction in which a potent brew of prejudices about aesthetics, gender and class churned.⁵¹ The spaces in which artistic authenticity flourished for Sickert were populated by working- or lower-middle-class subjects, a choice which said a little about aesthetics – his objection to paintings as airless, status objects rather than mediums of experiment – and a lot about his fetishisation of those differently positioned to himself. Much to Sickert's distaste, Sands stayed inside the limits of her known world, which began and ended with the social horizons of the drawing room. His assessment of her, in a frustrated outburst of uninvited career advice, stated the worthlessness of her personal repertoire to his understanding of modern art: 'your own tastes in dress & your personalities should be banished as much as possible from your oeuvre'.⁵² Implicit in Sickert's assumptions about the drawing room was a belief in the one-dimensional meaning and function of bourgeois

⁵¹ Walter Richard Sickert, 'Idealism', in *The Camden Town Group in Context*, ed. by Helena Bonett, Ysanne Holt, and Jennifer Mundy, *Tate Research Publication*, (May 2012), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/walter-richard-sickert-idealism-r1104279>, [accessed 23 April 2020]

⁵² TA, TGA 9125/5, Walter Sickert to NH, undated (Summer 1907).

domestic space, a simplicity which never held true for Sands, for whom surface and depth were always necessarily drastically different. Sickert failed to see the interest of what was readily accessible to the women, requiring no imaginative projection or appropriation. Sands and Hudson had a chance to explore the unexpected everydayness of a partnership cultivated in exceptionally hostile societal circumstances, and having staged and enabled those experiences of quiet transgression, the drawing room was the obvious setting for this radical, empirical work. Certainly working-class life had not had an adequate share of attention in the history of art, as Sickert argued, but queer feeling between women – recorded by the women themselves rather than lascivious male observers – had hardly been touched in centuries of representation.

The correspondence between Sickert and Sands traces his criticism of her work, and rarely does Sands object or respond in kind; however, her painting *Tea with Sickert* constitutes its own implicit response to his interference. Painted 1911, this interior scene angles our attention away from Sickert, the figure of cultural access and aspiration, and towards the satisfying glint and busy patterns of a tea service. Art in its most legitimate and rewardable form is pressed against the readily dismissed – easily consumed and tidied away – artfulness of the home, but Sands is clear in staking claim to one side of this divide. The pleasures of the latter are freely available, more abundant and various, and clearer than what Sickert is there to represent, who sits recumbent in a distant chair. Given his power in the art world, Sickert's attitude to the two women is easily guessed at, and here it is summarised by his higher position in the frame, stressing his belief in a hierarchical ordering of talents in which his superiority is assured.



Figure 59: Ethel Sands, *Tea with Sickert*, c.1911-12, Tate

At meetings with artists in the Fitzroy Street Group, an exhibiting organisation Sickert founded in 1907 to promote his own work and that of his followers, he expected Sands – one of the only female members – to pour the tea.⁵³ Yet here Sands expands upon what this small, domestic act means as an aesthetic and practice. The responsibilities that drew Sands away from her painting are summarised in the tea service, which was one shrewdly put together gesture amongst a succession of others all designed to ease emotional and intellectual encounter. Linda Nochlin, discussing Berthe Morisot's own depictions of tea parties – which were probably models for Sands – discusses their pertinence as symbols for art making. 'Perhaps presiding over the tea-table seemed paradigmatic to her of that other kind of 'work', or more accurately, art, which women of the leisured class engaged in,' she writes, 'the art of organising domestic ceremonies.'⁵⁴ Sands shows how the atmosphere of an afternoon might be carefully assembled: through the selection of one object or patterned cloth or guest over another; through pouring

⁵³ Mike Pentelow and Marsha Rowe, *Characters of Fitzrovia* (London: Pimlico, 2010), 151.

⁵⁴ Linda Nochlin, 'Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 21, No. 8, (15 April 1999).

tea and slicing cake according to a few elegantly orchestrated moves and all the while keeping the conversation afloat and engaging for all parties. The close attention to the props of this social ritual showcase the curatorial acumen involved in entertainment, elevating the domestic organisation that surrounded any offer of tea as equal to fine art in its engagement of time, effort, thought, specialist skill, invention and creative flair. The work that Sands did during those afternoons was by its very nature ephemeral, departed with the guests, contained in streams of chatter and whispered counsel, in new acquaintances and informal agreements, in introductions and unanticipated connections, but it was nevertheless critical to the binding and flourishing of her literary and artistic milieu, and therefore to English modernism more broadly. Sands pauses before she pours the tea, and reveals all the choices and decisions that went into a routine that Sickert had dismissed as too menial to perform.

In some respects, what was radical about Sands's work never wavered: the Impressionist painting is repeatedly seized and reworked. In Vita Sackville-West's caustic 1930 novel *The Edwardians*, the narrator passes through London rooms that resemble those in Sands's work, all similarly 'equally impersonal, conventional, correct'.⁵⁵ Sackville-West has her narrator experience this monied homogeneity merely as tedious, a testament to the unimaginative mindsets of these homes' inhabitants, but it is unclear whether Sands even entertained such mild judgements. The role Sands's paintings unconsciously play in shoring up and celebrating class hierarchies was not necessarily Vanessa Bell's target when she accused Sands of a 'fatal prettiness', but the unchallenged niceness and rightness of these works can feel unwelcome ground for any nuanced consideration of the context in which they were created.⁵⁶ Or, as Michael Hatt puts it rather generously of other bourgeois cultural production from this period: 'the ethical plenitude of [the] position is matched by political vacuity.'⁵⁷ The paintings present a clear vision of the personal coherence and contentment bestowed upon those with inherited fortunes, or what might be

⁵⁵ Vita Sackville-West, *The Edwardians* (London: Vintage, 2017), 137.

⁵⁶ KC, CHA/1/59/4/2, VB to RF, August 1912.

⁵⁷ Michael Hatt, 'Edward Carpenter and the Domestic Interior', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3, (2013) 397.

understood (to use Hatt's phrasing) as the unsurprising pleasures of political vacuity. However, these emotions were not necessarily always accessible to Sands: in her letters, surprisingly frank expressions of unhappiness abound.⁵⁸

'I feel particularly despairing this morning.'⁵⁹ (Days pass in begrudging service to her family.) 'Have you quite forgotten me dear one? I am beginning to wonder.'⁶⁰ (More hours alone with her thoughts.) 'I feel quite suicidal this morning.'⁶¹ (Impossible to always be apart like this.) 'I am feeling so wholly miserable and complaining when I ought to be so thankful that I have my own dear one.'⁶² (Some rooms still too treacherous to navigate together.) 'Everybody had a lovely time, except poor Ethel.'⁶³ (Stalling over saying Hudson's name at social events she feared inviting her to.) 'I am in such depths of blues that I cannot believe in any possibility of a bright future.'⁶⁴ (Watching suitable men approach Hudson with a certain intention in their gait, a sinking feeling in her gut.)

These expressions of loss were the thread that bound her early letters, and their stern affect was only intensified by the difficulty in deciphering the sentences that preceded and succeeded them. Attempting to align Sands's blithe paintings with these mournful passages meant accepting their apparent incapability held some deeper meaning. These were complementary rather than contradictory states, her painting and her letters; one sought to repair the damage of the other.

Sands's scores of flawless interiors animate her queer domesticity with refinement, taste, and sophistication, a corrective to the norms of late Victorian culture in which lesbianism had been linked with criminality and moral bankruptcy.⁶⁵ The art and literature the women

⁵⁸ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.8.1.

⁵⁹ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.6.7.

⁶⁰ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.7.7.

⁶¹ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.9.6.

⁶² TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.8.10.

⁶³ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.7.1.

⁶⁴ TA, ES to NH, 9125.1.8.1.

⁶⁵ See: Nicole Albert, *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-Siecle France* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2017)

encountered when they met at turn of the century in Paris consistently aligned lesbianism with violence, disease, hedonistic excess and social death. As documents for understanding themselves, these texts must have troubled many women, and Sands's desperately unhappy letters from her youth in Paris no doubt bore the weight of broader cultural representations of lesbians. To accept shame as the necessary compromise in loving Hudson was brave but unsustainable; the urgency of living otherwise pressed against both women, and eventually a strategy was formulated. Sands began to record their life together on canvas, a simple act of protest which proved revolutionary for them both. Only in dwelling over the luxurious particulars of her lifestyle with Hudson was Sands able to start addressing her deepest anxieties, moving her impression of her own queerness away from sin, perversion, sickness and degeneracy and towards pleasure.⁶⁶ On canvas, Sands defied the belief that her desires doomed her to a life of irrational melancholic attachment and romantic disappointment, painting as though happiness were synonymous with a particular style, a state she might be granted access to if she repeated the same colours and forms with enough tenacity.⁶⁷ Sands therefore could be said to engage with a version of what Susan Fraiman, heavily influenced by the philosophical work of Gaston Bachelard, describes as 'shelter writing': a mode of close, slow domestic description, it is precise and tender, 'a post-traumatic mode of realism that lingers over home renovation as an antidote to deprivation', Fraiman writes.⁶⁸ For shelter painting – as I will term Sands's version of Fraiman's model – there is a similar focus on small, inconsequential domestic practices, objects and aesthetics, which in the wake of a dislocation and dispossession on account of a stigmatized sexuality become urgent and precious acts.⁶⁹ While Sands's paintings appear to complacently dwell on the exclusionary nature of her wealth and class position, they might more generously be understood as celebrations of relief, ingenuity, perseverance and gratitude, affects associated with

⁶⁶ Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, xi.

⁶⁷ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward*, 6.

⁶⁸ Susan Fraiman, 'Shelter Writing: Desperate Housekeeping from Crusoe to Queer Eye,' *New Literary History*, Vol. 37, No. 2, (2006), 344.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

those who like Sands anticipated a life of emotional precariousness wrought with fear and impossible yearning, but instead arrived here: a beautiful, nurturing, loving and safe interior.⁷⁰

Each painting by Sands could be read through Fraiman's model, but two in particular stand out as images testament to the consolation, self-expression and queer possibility to be found in domesticity. *Nan Hudson Playing Patience* is unusual amongst Sands's work in featuring a human figure, and indeed even identifying it as Hudson: this is the only painting to do so. Hudson is clothed in luminous pink robe suggestive of a radiantly pleasurable leisure, the rest of the room has a mint-green wash that could place the scene at any hour of the day: dawn or dusk given Hudson's gown, although a sliver of blue sky suggestive of daylight in the window contests this assumption. There is no strict sense of routine, with the whims of the sitter more important than any strictly abided-by schedule, which more broadly figures the lack of conventional domestic order within the space: its governance through wholly different affects, desires and ambitions. The ambivalence of domestic life, all the inevitable compromise and self-alienation and misrecognition queer women risked in spaces so anathema to their desires, has been drained from the scene, and instead what Sands emphasises is the tenderness between its inhabitants. Their intimacy is so utterly familiar, effortless and exhaustive as to be almost invisible, unnavigable to an outsider, more like an electrical current or a change in temperature than a single definite act. But if their intimacy could be identified anywhere it would be in the precisely observed heaviness of Hudson's eyelids: Nan studies her cards, her eyes soft dashes of black paint expressive of fatigue.

⁷⁰ There are obvious differences between Sands's paintings and Fraiman's theory of shelter writing. One is the latter's emphasis on domestic work. Fraiman is interested in women writing about the home in ways which embrace the tedium and duty of household tasks, elevating these obligations to a state of sublimity and self-knowledge. She is also more interested in instances of happy domestic affects where those feelings are necessarily temporary: hence, the use of 'shelter' rather than the less precarious sounding 'home,' or similar. Perhaps in this context it is necessary to insist on access to this mode from subjects who are oppressed because of their sexual identity and gender, but not because of their class or race: to state that Sands's work represents shelter painting marked by upper-middle class behaviours, assumptions and ideologies.

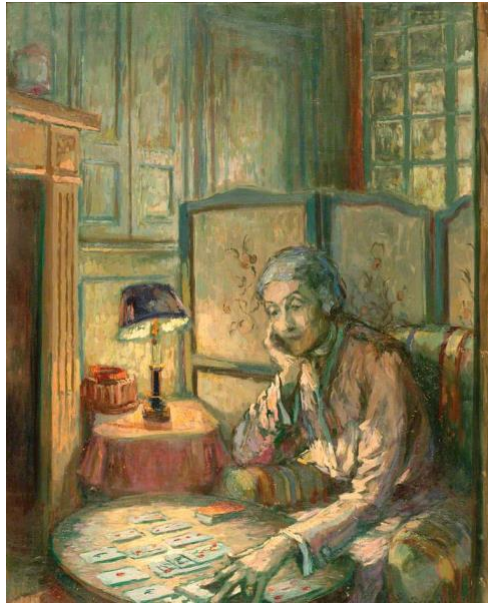


Figure 60: Ethel Sands, *Nan Hudson Playing Patience*, c.1920s, Guildhall Art Gallery

Played alone, patience works through laying out shuffled cards in an established pattern, then attempting to sort these cards into uniform decks of particular suits, using one prescribed movement at a time. The task is methodical, the stakes low, the pace entirely dependent on the player. Patience proved a popular pastime for women of Sands and Hudson's class precisely because of how adept it was at marrying so many elements of acceptable feminine behaviour, modelling to women the rewards of self-regulation, composure, and idleness, encouraging them to engage in activities that were an end in themselves. As a training ground for the unproductive and inconsequential, patience helped middle-class women acclimatise to the comfortable emptiness of their lives. With the sitter's vacant expression, her half-smile, and her head resting in her hand, along with the colour scheme of gentle neutrals, Sands's painting captures how the game was a form of relaxation that edged close to boredom. Nevertheless, Sands stresses the importance of card games such as patience in creating a zone of privacy for women: although the cards are spread before her, the woman's expression suggests she is elsewhere, daydreaming perhaps, her seclusion and self-sufficiency emphasised by the Japanese screen that encloses her.

The game is named as such because of its presiding affective register, how its tests players to tolerate the slowness and monotony of its process. Patience had a broader significance for the women, having gotten them far in their relationship in public, shaping how they communicated and behaved and even how they painted; in private, it had served as a way of testing out boundaries with their friends. Woolf, introduced to Sands through shared high society circles, after much wavering over her writing schedule spent three days with her and Hudson in Dieppe in the summer of 1927: the women motored along together through the countryside stopping to catch the steamers moving along the Seine, or to glimpse a stretch of startling blue sea from a churchyard on a cliff.⁷¹ In the evenings, Sands craved conversation while Hudson was content to listen from an armchair, sewing dusters.⁷² The mood evoked in Woolf's descriptions is sweet and uninhibited, but the playful atmosphere belied the calculations that necessarily accompanied any outsider entering their world. Only a closely guarded group had access to their intimate lives, and even then a stray comment or a misjudged friendship could prove disastrous, the veneer of correctness the pair had pieced together pretence by pretence over the years exploded in an instant. Each move Sands made within their network of friends and acquaintances had to be deliberated over and monitored so as to eliminate any dangers, to harden the boundaries against some while creating points of entry for others.

What this meant was intimacies that developed at a glacial pace. Even after the apparently deepening closeness promised by the visit to France, Woolf still referred to them half-seriously as 'the two discreet ladies'.⁷³ A nod to their shared secret, the omissions and tact their friendship demanded, lingering in this term of endearment was a sense of the unbreachable distance between herself and the couple. With such elaborate defences, it was possible to only get so close, even if every available test had been passed, and you were accepted into the higher

⁷¹ Virginia Woolf and Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3: 1925-30* (London: Mariner Books, 1981), 150–1.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Virginia Woolf and Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 4: 1931-35* (London: Mariner Books, 1983), 139.

strata of their confidence. Patience is at its core a game of grouping alike things together, and echoes the fastidious work that Sands and Hudson did to sort through and organise those that composed their social world, filing them into categories according to their potential harm or potential use, estimations that at times appeared cold, even ruthless. Once the game had been won, the women were left with a clear sense of who posed a threat, and a neatly assembled group from which they could draw their allies.

Patience is also about noticing patterns or logics where they are not otherwise apparent, and using that acuity to make connections. One way queer men and women recognised one other was through precisely calibrated forms of dress, behaviour, speech, geographies and taste; once those codes were learnt, they could be adopted, circulated, and acted upon with caution. Evidence suggests that Sands was conscious of this protected form of knowledge, and practised one of its most 'precious, devalued arts' in Sedgwick's words, in conveying vital, transformative information: gossip. Sedgwick's description of gossip as a queer strategy of connection and disclosure is so evocative and pertinent to Sands's work it is worth quoting in full:

'immemorially associated in European thought with servants, with effeminate and gay men, with all women, to have to do not even so much with the transmission of necessary news as with the refinement of necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationalized and provisional hypotheses about what kinds of people there are to be found in one's world.'⁷⁴

After an unimpressive first meeting with her future lover at a dinner party in December 1922, it was Sands who deftly informed Woolf of Vita Sackville West's 'sapphist' tendencies some months later, aware the revelation might prove useful to the newly acquainted women.⁷⁵ Patience stood in for the distinctly queer art of observation, analysis, connection and exchange, the coming together of intuition and empirical study which Sands – without any formal guidance or even much precedent to work from – had perfected over years of identifying possible

⁷⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, 23.

⁷⁵ Virginia Woolf and Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 2: 1920-24* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 235.

partners. Given a few masterfully steered conversations, Sands could emerge from it with a conclusive statement: sapphist, or not. The heavy eyelids Sands gives to Hudson in this painting convey tiredness as much as they do ease: the women could both play this game of identification as though it were second nature, or – as it were – with their eyes shut. As an example of shelter painting, *Nan Hudson Playing Patience* is striking in its representation of domesticity's queer satisfactions, its unexpected elements of self-discovery and recognition as well as its most cunning strategies and deep emotional agendas.

Fraiman describes shelter writing as defined partly through accumulation: such writing is built through descriptions replete with repetition, masses of detail which lend the objects under scrutiny a material presence, a technique made possible by narrative, where scenes can be returned to, observed and written again and again. Sands's work in series, the closest possible correlative to this textual effect, and those which are addressed to bedrooms in particular, express an equivalent repetitious attentiveness with all its rich affect. There are spare bedrooms with the hushed immaculate look of rare use, and bedrooms with guests absorbed in a book with their legs stretched across the covers, and bedrooms that have recently been vacated with the blankets still messily drawn across the mattress. These bedrooms are host to affects inclusive of, but not exclusive to, the erotic: there is studiousness, idleness, playfulness, and even – in the case of the hushed, vacated, solemnly dressed bed – intimations of loss. However, *Morning* is perhaps the boldest of all, the most closely associated with desire, and offers a distillation of the intimate life that Sands and Hudson shared in the decades that followed. The painting depicts a woman alone in a four poster bed, propped up by her pillows with a book open before her, enclosed by maroon, purple and pink fabrics and wallpaper, nestled under a blanket with only her head and shoulders visible, a lamp softly illuminating her as she reads. Morning light pours through a window on one side of the bedroom, but it is early enough that the other side remains obscured by darkness. Set at a watchful distance, the work is full of affectionate touches that are nevertheless cautious about intrusion. She is clothed, but surrounded by sensuous folds of fabric

reminiscent of exposed, flushed flesh, and her hair is undone in a metonymical hint at the other undressings and unravellings that occur between lovers. Nowhere is their relationship more alive than here: tenderness has been translated straight from sensation to paint.



Figure 61: Ethel Sands, *Morning*, c.1920s, Private Collection

As ever, Sands's work is operating on two distinct levels. On that of the personal, recording her life with Hudson, and that of the revisionary, with these bedrooms serving as a corrective to those she had encountered in the Western European canon. Sands would have developed her voice as an artist amongst reproductions of – to name but a few – Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1534), Diego Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647), and Jean August Dominique Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* (1814). In these scenes women are arranged lengthways, unclothed and supine on beds; the bedroom is merely a stage on which women can be laid out, undressed, and possessed, transformed into objects without a will of their own and over which men had absolute dominion. The bedrooms themselves are rarely of interest. The objects tend to blandly remark on the status of the men they are aimed at pleasing. As the nineteenth century progressed, the bedroom became more real, as painters like Sickert turned to brothels and petit-bourgeois interiors for their settings. Despite these changes in tone, women continued to remain

more like objects than human animals, conveying information about society or the male unconscious, and very rarely expressing themselves. As Francesca Berry writes of the nineteenth century French context, these scenes ‘intimately staged the veiled female body as an implicitly erotic object on the bourgeois bed.’⁷⁶ Sands’s scene is so thoroughly different to these precedents that detailing all the points of revision is easy enough: the sitter is granted their own self; the space is no longer instrumental, but specific in its personal effects, heavy with dreams and shared silence and kindling emotion; the offer of blunt access and trespass is replaced by the promise of intersubjectivity, with the sleeper conscious and meeting the gaze of the painter. Of course it was more than a series of simple and satisfying reversals. This list does not account for what is so mesmerizingly, sweetly rebellious about the scene.

If Sands was inspired by any bedroom scene, then it was not those of the realist tradition, but religious painting. In particular, *Morning* is reminiscent of a work by Vittore Carpaccio, *The Dream of St Ursula* (1495). The same muffled light, the neatly arranged stuff of a bedroom, and a similar sense of privacy entered into by a trusted figure. Ursula is asleep, alone in the nuptial bed just like Sands’s subject— the blankets tight around her too so as to stress her chastity — and at the foot of her bed is the Angel who will inform her of her martyrdom through a dream. Martyrdom is a ready metaphor for the experience of queer social stigma: in these narratives protagonists suffer for a higher purpose their assailants cannot grasp; faith and queer feeling are simply two possible uses of a transgressive desire. The story of Ursula’s plight has an especially queer resonance. Ursula accepts a proposal on the condition that she and her 11,000 virgin women disciples are permitted to set sail on a pilgrimage. Before her murder comes an intense, liberating experience of social death. Ursula is at sea surrounded by her own society of women, floating further and further from what is expected of her, no longer tied to a nation or to the family, the buoyancy of the boat and fluidity of their passage suggestive of the new values that

⁷⁶ Francesca Berry, ‘Bedrooms: Corporeality and Subjectivity’ in *Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians to the Moderns* ed. Georgina Downey (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 130.

might define her life. Ursula discovers the pleasures and dangers of navigating a path entirely for herself: the women are all slaughtered, and Ursula ultimately welcomes the arrow of her persecutors rather than accept marriage to their leader. The women are brutally sacrificed and through it guarantee their togetherness. Who needs the ordinary society of the living? Ursula's martyrdom represents the homosocial if not electrifyingly homoerotic promise of what might come from turning from given society and living forever with a band of faithful female followers.

Sands travelled to Venice on a few occasions, and would have visited the Gallerie dell'Accademia where Carpaccio's painting is displayed, but whether or not she actually saw it matters less than the vividness of this dialogue, how the queer feeling of one painting heightens the transgressive qualities of the other. In *Morning*, Sands places herself in the position of the Angel, granting Hudson the dream of a life apart from heteronormativity as a reality they woke to each morning. No dangerous rites. No need to actually die a grisly death – no actual martyrdom. But a sense nevertheless of being selected by some higher power to live differently, to bear its fruits as well as its wounds. After all, Sands and Hudson's love had grazed extremities, even after the sadness and secrecy that had defined the beginning of their relationship: nursing wounded soldiers together during the First World War, learning the practicalities of care and cure under immense pressure; painting dozens more canvases only to have all of them destroyed along with their house during the Blitz; Sands looking after Hudson during a long and gruelling illness, to which she would eventually succumb. *Morning* therefore visually embodies the 'practical, aesthetic and perhaps metaphysical desires' that Fraiman identifies in quintessential shelter writing.⁷⁷ These paintings together whisper an erotics of refusal, suffering and self-sacrifice. Two women lie tucked in bed centuries apart, seemingly innocent and chaste, their true desires mysterious, about to enter into a life radically other to the norm. The chronicle of Saint

⁷⁷ Fraiman, 'Shelter Writing: Desperate Housekeeping from Crusoe to Queer Eye,' 344.

Ursula provided a model for Sands of how desire might be removed from the straight world and displaced into a queer heaven of her own making.

4.5: Helen Coombe, *The Lemon* (1910)

Helen Coombe is rarely allowed more than a sentence in accounts of the Bloomsbury Group: known solely as its patriarch's enigmatic wife, the woman who married Roger Fry in 1896 and in subsequent years almost wholly disappeared. There she is, in one of the few surviving photos of the couple: set delicately against a wall, her face inscrutable, all of her small and brittle next to a man stood smiling rakishly at the camera. Discomfort radiates out of her. 'It is as though all trace of her had been lost,' a friend of Helen's remarked.¹

Coombe entered the Royal Academy Schools as a painter in 1883, and while many women struggled, their home educations inadequately preparing them for the challenges of art school, Helen did not. She excelled, won prizes. Her motivations were bigger and more political than most. She successfully campaigned for a woman's right to draw from partially draped figures.

Helen was penniless when she met Fry and considered a bad match by his family. No matter, he was besotted. 'I fell completely in love with her in one afternoon's talk,' Fry later confessed to his lover, Helen Anrep. Fry declared Coombe's work brilliant, animated by 'delicacy and strength and impressiveness'.² Real passion brought them together. She bore him two children. They remained married until his death in 1934.

Coombe pushes in faintly from the edges of Fry's archive. There exists a collection of letters sent jointly with Fry, full of practical family matters, and one letter alone in her own hand. Sent to her young son, it is an note of assurance and thanks, signed not Helen or Miss Coombe or Mrs Fry but 'Mummy'.³

A sketchbook from early in their marriage sees Fry drawing Coombe in profile; turn the page and she is there again, her head bowed; after that Fry observes sheep, landscapes, a cathedral, a woman in an 1890s shawl and hat, and ducks.⁴ Through every other sketchbook, the hope of

¹ Martin Ferguson Smith, 'Virginia Woolf and "the Hermaphrodite": A Feminist Fan of Orlando and Critic of Roger Fry', *English Studies*, Vol. 97, No. 3, (2016) 277–97.

² Ibid.

³ KC, REF 3/61, Helen Fry to Julian Fry, 2 October 1907.

⁴ KC, REF/4/1/23, Roger Fry's sketchbook.

seeing her remained: maybe her torso this time, the other side of her face, a smile – but no luck.

The elegant pocket diaries in yellow and blue that Fry filled with book recommendations, addresses and notes are entirely focused on a world of art and sociality in which Coombe appears not to exist. Her silhouette in red chalk was all I had.

Coombe was unusually skilled across mediums, working on canvas and in decorative schemes. Her only surviving painting is a meticulous, impressive copy of a work by Bellini. Mary gazes out, the miraculous baby in her arms, flanked by Saint John and an angel. Mary is the familiar mournful matriarch, the blue veil she wears encasing her in the very stuff of self-sacrifice. In this work Mary's sorrow is borrowed, darkly charged with private feeling: after the birth of her children, Coombe drifted into depression. Even with servants her routine rarely yielded free afternoons to paint, as she managed the household and generally maintained appearances while Fry travelled for work. Life shrank to a set of rooms. The same formal exchanges with staff, unread novels piled before her in the drawing room, headaches as the night drew in, a suffocating dread at dawn. John is a saint of record, of bearing witness, but there would be nobody to recount what Coombe endured during those years.

Coombe was 'not made happy by marriage', according to a friend, who visited her a few years after the wedding and found her 'battered and dissipated'.⁵ The adaptations that were demanded of her, to her aspirations, routines, and identity were too much. All her bargaining failed, and there were few options for women like that: broken, unwilling, unseemly in her refusals. Confined to an institution in 1910, Coombe remained there until the end of her life.

The diagnosis was vague, as for many women of her generation who struggled to have their problems precisely named by a predominantly male medical establishment: now thought by some to be schizophrenia, it was categorised then as melancholia and nerves. Seeing Fry often made Coombe more angry and unstable, a symptom Virginia Woolf had also experienced on

⁵ Smith, 'Virginia Woolf and "the Hermaphrodite"', 279.

seeing Leonard during her first breakdown. Their moods distressed their husbands, but they were not without cause. After decades of fear and avoidance, desire and the illusion of choice – the women undone by rage at the defeat their marriages represented.

In Fry's archive the most revealing document is one of Coombe's short stories from the late 1890s, a unique testament to her literary ambitions. The story offers a warning on the deathliness of bourgeois life. She describes 'a dreary monotonous street, evidently of the suburbs', then lingers over the more abject details: 'the once white lace curtains', 'the grinning stucco head over each doorway', and the sheer number of houses, multiplying 'interminably on into the hundreds', all of it bathed in a 'steady drizzle'.⁶ The street's inhabitants are observed attempting to reckon with this atmosphere of frayed virtue and threat. A young girl watches with curiosity as a dishevelled man stumbles towards her, down a street so circumscribed by a middle-class gentility that it is literally unable to contain the stranger's presence: he quickly falls and rolls 'heavily into the gutter'. When nobody else assists, the girl goes out to help, and her mother watches from the house, horrified that her daughter is hatless – fearing her neighbours' judgement – certain that she will spoil her clean pinafore. Embodying the callousness and hypocrisy of her class, the mother remains a figure of pity nonetheless; she is sad, lonely, vulnerable, and alienated. Her silk dress, limp and black and inexpensive, conveys that, as too do 'her minor worries, her ceaseless little cares' that dog her as she paces the house. 'Hers was a life absolutely without a history,' wrote Coombe, 'naked she had come into the world, and so far as the world's interest was concerned so she would leave it.' Mounting a critique of the social world Coombe hoped one day to leave forever, the story also unwittingly foretells its author's own dire fate: a woman left in the drawing room, waiting for her husband to return; a woman the world ceased to see; merely a silhouette, a woman who slipped clean out of history.

⁶ KC, REF 8/2, Helen Fry, untitled short story (18 pages) 1895–1899.

In an exhibition catalogue, happened across by chance, her work emerged colourless and condensed in a pair of standard entries –

Helen Fry, *Robert Trevelyan*, undated, pastel and watercolour, 19 x 14 ¼

Helen Fry, *Florence from Fiesole*, c.1896, oil on board, 9 1/4 x 12 ¾

(No reproductions.)

What else? In 1886 Coombe contributed to the decorative scheme of a Dolmetsch green harpsichord, work which was considered exceptional, and is now held at the Horniman Museum.

(Not currently on display.)

‘A mind of singular distinction,’ the art historian Tancred Borenius wrote of her in 1940, she produced work that was ‘akin to Manet in his last phase’.⁷ ‘One of the truly great “might have beens” of English art’, he claimed.⁸

Following the publication of Virginia Woolf’s biography of Roger, Dr Mary Louisa Gordon wrote to her criticising her representation of Helen. She and Coombe had once been close, and Mary cannot stress enough the injustice of the rendering of her friend, how poorly Virginia understood her. Mary is now elderly, but her vision of Helen is vivid: the pair of them talking through the minutiae of life over coffees, conspiring over the rejection of suitors. ‘She is only the pitiful nebulous ghost,’ Mary insisted. ‘I wished your book could have said something about the courageous charming young Helen of those days, so eager to live and learn, so full of ideas, the most promising open minded of women,’ Mary went on, ‘she opened windows – and round her was always clean air.’⁹

‘Akin to Manet in his late phase.’

⁷ Smith, ‘Virginia Woolf and “the Hermaphrodite”’, 279.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

As he grew older, Edouard Manet painted a number of small still lifes. Hams, asparagus, fish, oysters, brioche – most done in the last years of his life when illness limited his mobility. In the absence of more work by Coombe, there is a thrill in claiming Manet's work as her own, a change in attribution that feels nothing less than an essential meting out of justice. It would mean replacing countless labels on gallery walls, apologising for decades of error: these works can no longer be said to belong to Manet; their true creator has at last been discovered.

One work in particular. *The Lemon* is no longer an 1880 painting by Manet. A lemon is placed on a tarnished silver dish, chosen for its heft and shine. The table is swept clean, the room beyond is bare, unimportant. Coombe's hands working over her easel. Light filling her studio. Yellow paint under her fingernails. Specks of silver on her smock. The form materialising bit by bit before her, the colours following her through the night: dreams washed in butter, gold, chrome. Moving past the peel and the pith to the flesh, until the lemon's bitter taste fills her mouth. Nothing else on her mind but this. Showing it to Fry. Not showing it to Fry. Keeping it as a private message of hope for herself, a reminder of her talent. Helen Coombe, *The Lemon*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 140 x 220mm.

Epilogue: 'This Dark Country'

This thesis begins with a passage from Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay 'Women and Fiction,' written the same year as the better known set of lectures that would make up the extended essay *A Room of One's Own*.¹ Both texts, broadly speaking, address the immense obstacles women historically faced in seeking out a creative vocation, the pressures they continued to do battle with, and the possibilities that resided within women who defiantly set themselves against the ideologies that inhibited their work. *A Room of One's Own* could be summarised through its emphasis on education, space and finances, whereas 'Women and Fiction' is concerned almost entirely with the problem of form: the uneasy possibilities offered by novels that historically were designed, occupied and popularised by men. In this essay Woolf focuses on fiction, her own pursuit, but what she details equally applies to those women making art. What unites the disparate work made by the women in this thesis is their attempt to illuminate the 'dark country' Woolf understood to be women's everyday experiences, desires and domestic practices. The metaphor Woolf uses stresses the unanticipated vastness of domestic life, its distinct ecosystem, politics and customs, and with its faintly colonial implications – evoking uncharted territories, racially othered subjects, and Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella, which appears later in the same essay – it more broadly lends a political valence to what was considered private, and therefore without wider importance. The 'country' of gendered experience is also dark in the sense of being anonymous, impossible to see or identify. 'Often nothing tangible remains of a woman's day,' Woolf writes, and it was this sense of lack – and its inevitable hopelessness, purposelessness, and dissatisfaction – which women artists directly responded to through the affective and material worlds represented by their still life.

Together, these works elevate and give permanent form to what Woolf identified as having an essentially ephemeral existence: the preparation of food and the care of children, as

¹ Virginia Woolf, 'Women and Fiction' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume 5, 1929-1932*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 28-36. All further references will be to this edition.

well as the more ‘baffling and puzzling’ material, the emotions and thoughts women entertained alongside or in excess of those established habits and actions, rarely set down in writing. If women were, as Woolf argues, excluded from certain experiences, bound to ‘her home and her emotions’ as she puts it – repeating the personal pronoun to stress the lack of universality to these subjects – then these artists committed themselves to exploring in granular detail the affective possibilities available within these apparently limited bounds. Woolf points out how different Conrad’s novels would have been without his ability to become a sailor, or how Tolstoy’s understanding of life as a soldier informed his epic fiction. Despite Woolf’s stated admiration for women novelists deprived of these experiences as well as the domestic repertoire of her own fiction, within these comparisons there lingers an evaluative criteria in which the public life of war and colonisation and travel are important, replete with universally applicable insights about humanity, and the ‘home and emotions’ are trivial in their banality and particularity.² In common with Woolf’s fiction, if not this particular moment in an essay written across a lifetime of complex, richly ambivalent thought about women’s creativity, this thesis challenges this binary thinking, revealing domestic space to be a site through which the politics of sexuality and gender, aesthetics and genre, knowledge, intimacy and solitude, have been worked through towards a set of radical resolutions. In doing so, these works lay claim to a significance to the particular rather than the universal, and so ‘alter the current scale of values’ in Woolf’s words. For these women, still life created a context in which normative femininity as it was connected to the experience of domesticity became an unexpected queer resource, animating questions about work, belonging, and fulfilment, and eliciting a clutch of positive affects in contrast to the ambivalence and incoherence traditionally associated with that realm and its prescribed roles of virtue, value and social currency. Their still life bear witness to negotiations

² Woolf’s personal tastes were often at odds with her cultural politics: she was dismissive of many women writers of her generation, friends and lovers such as Katherine Mansfield and Vita Sackville-West included. The ambivalence in these remarks about men’s writing – an admiration mixed with a frustration about her own horizons – are consistent with this position.

specific to women's early twentieth century context: with their emotional life no longer strictly regulated by law and custom, at least not to the same extent, these deceptively simple paintings show where women directed their desires and interests, how they managed familial intimacies and erotic potentialities and domestic necessities, and how they were revising those affective horizons in accordance with their newly accessed needs and wants. The sustaining forms of self-construction, dignity, pleasure and artistic discipline are all condensed within the still life examined in this thesis.

Woolf frames the problem facing women fiction writers as essentially formal, in that 'the very form of the sentence does not fit her,' stating that the dominant sentence as crafted and circulated by men is 'too loose, too heavy, too pompous.' Woolf's mischievous description brings to mind a rotund elderly man, authoritative, spoiled, unconcerned with his appearance, loquacious and complacent. As this thesis has observed more than once, within the realm of art and the history of representation, the easel painting and its established genres of history, biblical scene and portraiture were practices and forms long excelled in by men, and less available to women because of their limited access to formal art education, even with the advances of the twentieth century. Woolf's deflation of the traditional sentence enables thinking about this disparity as a problem with genre rather than gender: narratives about Christ and records of men's status would not have suited the experiences women felt with great urgency they must observe and describe. Still life as a realist genre, a record of what surrounded them and what emotional situations bound them, far better accommodated the 'natural shape of her thought' in Woolf's phrase, 'without crushing or distorting it.' The sentence is the basic unit Woolf regards as determining the rhythm and ethics of a text, and whatever equivalence there might be with painting is inevitably inexact: however, this thesis argues that the basic foundations of the still life painting – its stated setting, visual vocabulary and affective content – were all adapted and revised as Woolf urged women do with texts.

In 'Women and Fiction', Woolf draws together numerous women writers from throughout time and across the globe, moving from Lady Murasaki to George Elliot, dazzling exceptions to the norm from which, she concludes, very little practical advice can actually be drawn. Why some women wrote nothing, she argues, and why others wrote masterpieces, is unclear. And yet, within a few sentences it seems Woolf has qualified this statement, insisting that 'the extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman,' setting up a distinction that one might imagine was reducible to, or euphemistic of, class. Whether women had money of her own (or any financial comfort whatsoever), whether she had housework she was obliged to do or servants to do it on her behalf, whether she had a room to herself or no privacy at all, these questions, Woolf insists – conditions which are arguably determining of one's class background – are vital in measuring what the prerequisites were for women embarking upon artistic lives and careers. In this thesis, I have shown how still life obliquely describes and embodies these material conditions, and in each instance reveals the relative comfort experienced by John, Bell, Gluck and Sands, and the role those middle-class freedoms played in enabling their artistic practices. In these works, food is abundant, accommodation is secured, and – perhaps with the exception of John – rooms are cleaned by others, and money is received through channels of inheritance or established business which do not demand one's own labour. The aura of plenitude and invulnerability these works telegraph at once possesses a queer resonance connected to the self-protection and wilfully sought out happiness necessitated by certain forms of oppression and is a symptom of how little those ideological constraints effected the material conditions of middle-class women's lives. However, the women artists who exist in the spaces between each chapter of this thesis, who were for the most part identically positioned in terms of gender, race and class, suggest that even that affluence was no guarantee, and no set of privileges were an exact or absolute way out of patriarchal oppression.

Still life, this thesis has ultimately argued, was for many women artists in this period a locus of becoming and feeling, an affective medium of queer transformation. To cement this

impression, and to add one final elaboration on this point, it is worth attending to a remark made about the genre by Katherine Mansfield. Mansfield finds herself drawn to a stall of fruit on a walk through town, and stalls before them much as one would a still life in an art museum, and we might therefore take her description of this everyday experience as an oblique form of theorising on still life. Writing to the artist Dorothy Brett, who herself painted still life, and was no doubt primed to receive a statement like this, Mansfield offers her own idiosyncratic theory on the fantasies enclosed within the genre:

‘What can one do, faced with this wonderful tumble of round bright fruits, but gather them and play with them – and become them, as it were. When I pass the apple stalls, I cannot help stopping and staring until I feel that I, myself, am changing into an apple too – and that any moment I may produce an apple, miraculously, out of my own being like the conjurer produces an egg.’³

In this verbal still life, Mansfield invests the apples with the possibility of a perverse, queer form of reproduction in which a compassionate, playful connection between wildly different biological organisms is enough to produce new life, rendering men and heterosexual partnership redundant. Still life, Mansfield’s remarks imply, encourages further study and exploration of the world around us, rather than any simple or passive consumption. She does not buy or eat the fruits, she does not hold any dominion over them, quite the opposite; she becomes them through the sheer intensity of the visual and perceptual experience. For the women in this thesis, still life relayed the satisfactions of the expected, the predictable. However, rather than just representing these humdrum realities, still life is here also understood as a zone of enchantment or a magical instrument capable of wholly altering one’s physical being and status as a human subject. The assembled fruits offer kinship, revelatory affinities, as well as refuge from gendered embodiment and its presumed endpoints. In aligning the apple with an egg, a symbol of fertility and rebirth, there is a sense that this process of ecstatic attachment and personal transformation is just the beginning: more aliveness, connection and production lies in wait. Mansfield’s ecstatic

³ Katherine Mansfield, *Collected Letters Volume 1: 1903-1917*, ed. by Vincent O’Sullivan, Margaret Scott (Oxford, OUP: 1984), 330.

reading of this lived, impromptu still life speaks to the most utopian aspects of the affective possibilities John, Bell, Gluck and Sands all found within the genre.

WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Sara, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)
- . *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010)
- Alexander, Sally 'Room of One's Own: 1920s Feminist Utopias,' *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2000), 273-88.
- Allen, Ann, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe, 1890–1970: The Maternal Dilemma*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Allmer, Patricia, 'Introduction' in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*. ed. Patricia Allmer (London: Prestel, 2009), 1-18.
- Anderson, Anne, 'Drawing Rooms: A Backward Glance—Fashioning an Individual Drawing Room' in *Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians to the Moderns*, ed. by Georgina Downey (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 39-60.
- Andreadis, Harriette, 'Re-configuring early modern friendship: Katherine Phillips and Homoerotic Desire,' *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Vol. 46, No.3, (2006), 523-542.
- Armstrong, Isobel, *Victorian glassworlds: glass culture and the imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- Armstrong, Mark, 'A Room in Chelsea: Quentin Crisp at Home'. *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2011), 155-69.
- Arrowsmith, Rupert Richard, 'The Transcultural Roots of Modernism: Imagist Poetry, Japanese Visual Culture, and the Western Museum System', *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (2011), 27-42.
- Bahun, Sanja *Modernism and Melancholia Writing as Countermourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)
- Balducci, Temma *Gender, Space, and the Gaze in Post-Haussmann Visual Culture : Beyond the Flaneur* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017)

- Baraitser, Lisa, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008)
- . ‘mothers who make things public,’ *Feminist Review*, Vol. 93, No.1, (2009), 8-26.
- Baron, Wendy, *Miss Ethel Sands and her Circle* (London: Owen, 1977)
- Barthes, Roland, *Roland Barthes* (London: Vintage, 2020)
- . *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989)
- Battershill, Claire and Peat, Alexandra, ‘Introduction: Modernism and Collaboration,’ *Literature & History*, Vol. 28, No. 1, (2019), 3-9.
- Baudelaire, Charles, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964)
- Bauer, Denise, ‘Alice Neel’s Portraits of Mother Work,’ *WSA Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, (2002), 102-120.
- Beaumont, Caitriona, *Housewives and citizens: Domesticity and the women's movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013)
- Beckett, Jane and Cherry, Deborah, ‘Modern women, modern spaces: women, metropolitan culture and Vorticism’ in *Women and Modernism* ed. by Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 36-54.
- Behr, Shulamith, *Women Expressionists* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1988)
- Bell, Vanessa, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell* ed. Regina Marler (London: Bloomsbury, 1994)
- Benstock, Shari, ‘Expatriate Sapphic Modernism: Entering Literary History,’ in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, ed. by Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 183-203.
- Berlant, Lauren, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008)
- Berman, Marshal, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (London: Verso, 1983)

- Berry, Francesca, 'Bedrooms: Corporeality and Subjectivity' in *Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians to the Moderns* ed. Georgina Downey (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 129-146.
- . 'Designing the Reader's Interiors: Subjectivity and the Woman's Magazine in Early Twentieth Century France', *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (Spring 2005), 61-79.
- . 'Housewife Writ Large: Marie Mécannique, Paulette Bernège, and New Feminist Domesticity in Interwar France', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 1, (2017), 7-26.
- . "'Maman is my Muse': The Maternal as Motif and Metaphor in Edouard Vuillard's Intimisme", *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 34, No.1, (2011), 55-77.
- Betterton, Rosemary 'Women artists, modernity and suffrage cultures in Britain and Germany, 1890-1920' in *Women Artists and Modernism* ed. by Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 18-35.
- Bilston, Sarah, 'Queens of the Garden: Victorian Women Gardeners and the Rise of the Gardening Advice Text', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 36, No.1, (2008), 1-19.
- Birnbaum, Paula J., *Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities* (London: Routledge, 2011)
- Blum, Beth, 'Modernism's Anti-Advice', *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (2017), 117-139.
- Boaden, James, 'Moving Houses: Jess and Robert Duncan's Queer Domesticity,' *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2, (2013), 257-280.
- Boddy, Kasia, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008)
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 'The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods,' *Media, Culture and Society*, trans. by Richard Nice, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1980), 261-293.
- Bowlby, Rachel, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (London: Routledge, 2009)
- Boyer, Anne, *Garments Against Women* (London, Berlin: Mute, 2016)

- Braidotti, Rosi, 'Becoming Woman: Or Sexual Difference Revisited', *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 20, No.3, (2003), 43-64.
- Briganti, Chiari and Mezei, Kathy, 'Introduction' in *Living with Strangers Bedsits and Boarding Houses in Modern English Life, Literature and Film*, ed. by Chiari Briganti and Kathy Mezei (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 1-24.
- Brockington, Grace, 'A Lavender Talent or the Most Important Woman Painter in Europe? Reassessing Vanessa Bell,' *Art History*, Vol. 36, No.1, (2013), 128-153.
- . 'In Focus: *Abstract Painting* c.1914 by Vanessa Bell,' *Tate Research*, www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/abstract-painting-vanessa-bell/
- Bronfen, Elisabeth, *Dorothy Richardson's Art of Memory: Space, Identity, Text* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999)
- Brossat, Alain and Klingberg, Sylvia, *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017)
- Brown, Bill, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2010)
- Browne, Max, 'Edna Clarke Hall (1879-1979) and Wuthering Heights', *British Art Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2, (2015), 108-118
- Bryan-Wilson, Julia, and Dunye, Cheryl, 'Imaginary Archives: A Dialogue,' *Art Journal*, Vol. 72, No. 2, (Summer 2013), 82-89.
- Bryson, Norman, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 2017)
- Buchloh, Benjamin, 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression,' *October*, Vol. 16 (1981)
- Bucklow, Spike, *Red: The Art and Science of Colour* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016)
- Bürger, Peter, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986)
- Burnstein, Jessica, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2012)

Butler Judith and Kotz, Liz, 'The Body You Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler,' *Art Forum*, Vol. 31, No. 3, (November 1992), 82-89.

Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011)

———. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (1988), 519-531.

———. 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry, Marilyn Pearsall (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 371-387.

———. 'The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva,' *Hypatia*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (1988), 104-118.

Butler, Judith,

Calinescu, Matei, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987)

Campbell, Elizabeth A., 'Don't Say it With Nightshades: Sentimental Botany and the Natural History of Atropa Belladonna,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* Vol. 35, No. 2, (2007), 607-615.

Caroli, Dorena, *Day Nurseries & Childcare in Europe, 1800–1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

Carson, Anne, 'Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity' in *Men in the Off Hours* (London: Jonathon Cape, 2000), 130- 142.

Carver, Beci, *Granular Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

Casteras, Susan, *Vanessa Bell, 1879-1961: An Exhibition of Her Paintings, Drawings, Designs, Prints, and Book Jackets, September 20-October 28, 1984* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Vassar College Art Gallery, 1984)

Castle, Terry, *The Apparitional Lesbian: female homosexuality and modern culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993)

Caughie, Pamela, *Disciplining Modernism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

Chadwick, Whitney, *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993)

———. *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991)

Christensen, Charlotte, 'A Look at the Over-Looked', *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History* Vol. 65, No. 2, (1996), 135-42.

Clark, T. J., *In the Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008)

Constant, Caroline, 'The Nonheroic Modernism of Eileen Gray,' *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 53, No. 3, (1994), 265-279.

Corbett, David Peters, 'Seeing into Modernity: Walter Sickert's Music Hall Scenes, c. 1887-1907 and English Modernism,' *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (April 2000), 285-306.

———. *The Modernity of English Art, 1914-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997)

Crow, Thomas, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998)

Cuddy-Keane, Melba, Hammond, Adam and Peat, Alexandra, *Modernism: Keywords* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) 119-123.

Cummings, Laura, 'Indifferent Shades of Gay,' in *The Observer*, (9th April 2017)
 <www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/09/queer-art-tate-britain-review-laura-cumming>

Cvetkovich, Ann, *An archive of feelings: trauma, sexuality, and lesbian public cultures* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003)

Dally, Ann *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal* (London: Burnett, 1982)

Daly, Nicolas, 'The Woman in White: Whistler, Hiffernan, Courbet, Du Maurier', *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 12, No. 1, (2005), 1-25.

Davis, Angela, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England 1945-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014)

Davis, Glyn, 'The Queer Archive in Fragments: Sunil Gupta's London Gay Switchboard,' *GLQ*, Vol. 27, No. 1, (2021), 121.

de la Haye, Amy with McIntosh Patrick, Andrew, 'Gluck and The Fine Art Society' in *Gluck: Art and Identity*, 114-134.

- Deepwell, Katy, *Women Artists between the Wars : A Fair Field and No Favour* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010)
- DeKoven, Marianne, *Rich and Strange: Gender, History and Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991)
- Delap, Lucy “‘For ever and ever’”: Child-raising, domestic workers and emotional labour in twentieth century Britain,’ *Studies in the Maternal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (2011), 1-10.
- Derrida, Jacques, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)
- Derry, Caroline, ‘Lesbianism and Feminist Legislation in 1921: the Age of Consent and Gross Indecency between Women,’ *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 86, No.1, (2018), 245-267.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn, *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012)
- . ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities A Roundtable Discussion,’ *GLQ*, Vol. 13, No. 2-3 (2007), 177-195.
- Doan, Laura, *Fashioning Sapphism: the origins of a modern English lesbian culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001)
- . ‘Topsy-Turvydom Gender Inversion, Sapphism, and the Great War,’ *GLQ*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2006), 517-542.
- Drewery, Claire, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: the liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011)
- Duffy, Enda, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009)
- Eagleton, Terry ‘Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism’ in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. by Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (London: Phaidon, 1992), 91-100.
- Edelman, Lee, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004)

- Edwards, Jason, *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert Amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006)
- Elliot, Bridget Ann and Ann-Wallace, Jo, *Women Writers and Artists: Modernist (im)positionings* (London: Routledge, 1994)
- Ellman, Maud, 'The Foundation of the Unconscious: Schelling, Freud and the Birth of the Modern Psyche (Book Review)', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 42, No. 1, (2015), 218-220.
- Engelhardt, Molly 'Victorian Sélams and Talking Bouquets: Phallic Invasion of the Feminine/Floral Order', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (Fall 2016), 343-363.
- Engelhardt, Molly, 'The Language of Flowers in the Victorian Knowledge Age,' *Victoriographies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 136-160
- . 'Victorian Sélams and Talking Bouquets: Phallic Invasion of the Feminine/Floral Order,' *Tulsa studies in women's literature*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (2016), 343-363.
- English, Elizabeth, *Lesbian modernism: censorship, sexuality and genre fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015)
- Evans, Elizabeth F., *Threshold Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)
- Farfan, Penny, *Performing Queer Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)
- Farrelly, Elizabeth, 'The Contentious Constance Spry,' paper delivered at 'Designing Women, Post War British Textiles Study Day', hosted by Fashion and Textiles Museum and the University of Brighton, May 2012. Text available online <http://www.liz-farrelly-visits.org/2015/08/31/conference-paper-contentious-constance-spry/>.
- Faulk, Barry J., 'Modernism and the Popular: Eliot's Music Halls,' *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 8, No.4, (November 2001), 603-621.
- . *Music Hall and Modernity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004)
- Feldman, Shoshana, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987)

- Feinberg Cohen, Monica, *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)
- Felski, Rita, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: feminist literature and social change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989)
- . *Gender and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995)
- . *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015)
- Ferguson Smith Martin, 'Virginia Woolf and "the Hermaphrodite": A Feminist Fan of Orlando and Critic of Roger Fry', *English Studies*, Vol. 97, No. 3, (2016) 277–97.
- Flower, Chloe 'Wilful Design: The Sampler in Nineteenth-Century Britain,' *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 21, No.3 (2016), 301-321.
- Foster, Alicia, *Gwen John* (London: Harry N. Abrams, 2016)
- Foster, Thomas, *Transformations of Domesticity in Modern Women's Writing: Homelessness at Home* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)
- Foucault, Michel, 'Friendship as a Way of Life' in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-84*, Vol.1, ed by Paul Rabinow, trans by Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin, 2000), 135-140.
- Fraiman, Susan, 'Shelter Writing: Desperate Housekeeping from Crusoe to Queer Eye,' *New Literary History*, Vol. 37, No. 2, (2006), 341-359.
- Franits, Wayne E. *The Paragons of Virtue. Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993)
- Frascina, Francis, Blake, Nigel, Fer, Briony, Garb, Tamar and Harrison, Charles, *Modernity and Modernism. French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)
- Fraser, Nancy, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere,' *Social Text*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (1990), 56-81.
- Freccero, Carla, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005)
- . 'Queer Times,' *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol.106, No.3 (Summer 2007), 485-494.
- Freeman, Elizabeth, 'Still After,' *South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol. 106, No. 3 (2007), 495-500.

- . *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010)
- Freidberg, Anne, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1994)
- Freidman, Susan, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015)
- Frosh, Stephen, 'Psychoanalysis in Britain: "The rituals of destruction"' in *A Concise Companion to Modernism* ed. by David Bradshaw (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 116-137.
- Fuller, Matthew and Goriunov, Olga, *Bleak Joys: Aesthetics of Ecology and Impossibility* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019)
- Fuss, Diana, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Rooms and the Writers that Shaped Them* (London: Routledge, 2004)
- Galchen, Rivka, *Little Labours* (New York: New Directions, 2016)
- Gallop, Jane, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002)
- Gaze, Delia, Mihajlovic, Maja and Shrimpton, Leanda, *Dictionary of Women Artists* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997)
- Getsy, David J., *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004)
- Glavey, Brian, *The Wallflower Avant-Garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)
- Goody, Jack, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)
- Grant, Catherine, 'A narrative of what wishes what it wishes it to be': An Introduction to 'Creative Writing and Art History,' *Art history*, Vol. 34, No. 2, (April 2011), 230-243.
- Greenberg, Clement, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions And Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988)
- Greer, Germaine, *The Obstacle Race: the fortunes of women painters and their work* (London: Picador, 1981)

- Grootenboer, Hanneke, *The rhetoric of perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)
- Grosz, Elizabeth, *Architecture from the Outside* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001)
- Guerlac, Suzanne, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006)
- Halberstam, Jack, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998)
- . 'Introduction' in *Queer British Art* ed. by Clare Barlow (London: Tate, 2017) 1-10.
- . *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. (New York, NYU Press, 2005)
- Hall, Stuart and Gieben, Bram, *Formations of Modernity* (London: Polity Press, 1992)
- Hamlett, Jane, *Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class Families in England, 1850 – 1910* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2010)
- Hammerschlag, Keren, 'The Deathly Sleep of Frederic Leighton's Painted Women', *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (2012), 201-215.
- Hammil, Faye, 'Noel Coward and the Sitwells: enmity, celebrity, popularity,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 39, No. 1, (2015), 129-148.
- Harris, Alexandra, *Romantic Moderns* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010)
- Harvey, Melissa, 'Dwelling, Poaching, Dreaming: Housebreaking and Homemaking in Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage,' in *Inside Out: Women Negotiating, Appropriating, Subverting Public and Private Space*, ed. by Teresa Gómez Reus and Aránzazu Usandizaga, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 167-188.
- Hatt, Michael and Ledbury, Mark, *Fictions of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013)
- Hatt, Michael, 'Edward Carpenter and the Domestic Interior', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3, (2013) 397.
- . 'Near and far: Homoeroticism, labour and Hamo Thornycroft's *Mower*', *Art History*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (2003), 26–55.

Heidegger, Martin, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 1975)

Heilmann, Ann, 'Feminist Resistance, the Artist and "A Room of One's Own" in New Woman Fiction', *Women's Writing: The Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, Vol.2, No.3, (1995), 291-308.

Heilmeyer, Marina, *The Language of Flowers: symbols and myths*. (London: Prestel, 2006)

Hemmings, Clare *Considering Emma Goldman: feminist political ambivalence and the imaginative archive*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018)

———. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011)

Hemus, Ruth, *Dada's Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)

Higonnet, Anne, 'Secluded Vision: Images of Feminine Experience in Nineteenth Century Europe', in in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude (Nashville, TN: Westview Press, 1992), 171-185.

Holroyd, Michael, *Lytton Strachey: The New Biography* (London: Pimlico, 2011)

hooks, bell, 'Revolutionary Motherhood' in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* ed. Andrea O'Reilly (London: Demeter Press, 2007), 145-156.

Hornby, Louise, *Still Modernism: Photography, Literature, Film* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017)

Howells, Richard, "Copies and translations: Roger Fry, Old Masters and the Omega Workshops." *British Art Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (2015), 47-57.

Hughes, Robert, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Knopf, 1981)

Humm, Maggie *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography and Cinema* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002)

Huyssen, Andreas, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986)

- Jackson-Houlston, Caroline, “‘Queen Lilies’? The Interpenetration of Scientific, Religious and Gender Discourses in Victorian Representations of Plants’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 11, No.1, (2006), 84-110.
- Jaggar, Alison, ‘Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology’, *Inquiry*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1989), 151-176.
- Jameson, Frederic, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002)
- John, Gwen and Lloyd-Morgan, Ceridwen, *Letters and Notebooks : Selected from the Gwen John Papers at the National Library of Wales*. (London: Tate Publishing in Association with National Library of Wales, 2004)
- John, Ida, *The Good Bohemian Letters of Ida John* ed by Rebecca John and Michael Holroyd (eds), (London: Bloomsbury, 2017)
- Jones, Amelia, *Irrational Modernism: a neurasthenic history of New York Dada* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004)
- . *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012)
- King, Amy M. *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)
- King, Amy M., *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)
- Koestembaum, Wayne, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1989)
- Krauss, Rosalind, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994)
- Kristeva, Julia, ‘Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini’ in *French Feminism Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 176-181.
- Kristeva, Julia, ‘Stabat Mater’ in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 160-186.

- Kristeva, Julia, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984)
- . ‘Women’s Time’, *Signs*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (1981), 13-35.
- L MacDonald, Cameron, ‘Manufacturing Motherhood: The Shadow Work of Nannies and Au Pairs’, *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 21, No. 1, (1998), 25-53.
- Lacan, Jacques, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’ in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: WW Norton & Co., 2007), 75-81.
- Latimer, Tirza, ‘Conversations on Queer Affect and Queer Archives’, *Art Journal*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (Summer 2013)
- Lauster, Martina, ‘Walter Benjamin's Myth of the Flaneur’, *Modern Language Review*, Vol.10, No.2, (2007), 139-156.
- Leaper, Hana, “‘Immortal Apples and Eternal Eggs’”: Life and Still Life in the Bedsits of Bloomsbury’ in *Living with Strangers Bedsits and Boarding Houses in Modern English Life, Literature and Film* ed. by Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 43-62.
- Lehman, Robert, ‘Original Nonsense: James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, and Modernism’s Genius,’ *modernism/modernity*, Vol. 27, No. 2, (2020), 339-360.
- Light, Alison, ‘Behind the Green Baize Door,’ *London Review of Books*, Vol. 42 No. 5, (5 March 2020)
- . *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991)
- Liss, Andrea, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)
- Lorde, Audre, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017)
- Love, Heather, *Feeling Backward* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007)
- Lowrie, Joyce O., *Mirrors in Texts – Texts in Mirrors* (Leiden: Brill, 2008)
- Lunn, Eugene, *Marxism and Modernism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1984)

- Lynch, Leah, 'Intemperate time: Queer(ing) temporality and narrative in Nightwood,' *Women's Studies Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 84-102.
- Mahoney, Deidre M., "'More Than an Accomplishment': Advice on Letter Writing for Nineteenth-Century American Women,' *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 3, (2000), 411-423.
- Malcolm, Janet *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (London: Vintage, 1995)
- Mander, Raymond, *Theatrical companion to Coward: A pictorial record of the first performances of the theatrical works of Noël Coward*, (London: Rockliff, 1957)
- Mansfield, Katherine, *Collected Letters Volume 1: 1903-1917*, ed. by Vincent O'Sullivan, Margaret Scott (Oxford, OUP: 1984)
- . *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2007)
- Mao, Douglas and Walkowitz, Rebecca L., 'Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New' in *Bad Modernism* ed. by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1-17.
- Margaroni, Maria, 'The Lost Foundation: Kristeva's Semiotic Chora and Its Ambiguous Legacy,' *Hypatia*, Vol. 20, No. 1, (2005), 78-98.
- Marion Young, Iris, 'House and Home' in *On Female Body Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-45.
- Martin, Simon, 'The Individual Artist: Gluck and Modern British Art', in *Gluck: Art and Identity*, 86-113.
- Matz, Jesse, 'Cultures of Impression' in *Bad Modernism*, ed. by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 298-330.
- Mavor, Carol, *Aurelia: Art and Literature Through the Mouth of the Fairy Tale* (London: Reaktion, 2017)
- . *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jete, Sans Soleil, and Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012)

- . *Blue Mythologies: Reflections on a Colour* (London: Reaktion, 2013)
- . *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1995)
- Medd, Jodie, *Lesbian Scandal and the Culture of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002)
- Meskimmon, Marsha, *We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1999)
- Mullholland, Terri, *British Boarding Houses in Interwar Women's Literature: Alternative Domestic Spaces*. (London: Routledge, 2016)
- Muñoz Martín, Ana, 'Bodies on the Threshold: The Significance of Fabrics in John Singer Sargent's Male Nudes, 1890–1915', *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2018), 66-88.
- Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia: 10th Anniversary Edition* (New York: NYU Press, 2019)
- . *Disidentifications: queers of color and the performance of politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)
- . 'Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,' *Women and Performance*, Vol.8, No.2 (1996), 5-16.
- Natalie Prizel, 'Beside Women: Charles Dickens, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Reparative Lesbian Literary History,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2-3 (June 2018), 267-289.
- Nead, Lynda, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1992)
- Nelson, Maggie, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, Graywolf Press, 2015)
- . *Women, The New York School, And Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007)
- Ngai, Sianne, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007)
- Nicholson, Virginia, *Singled Out* (London: Penguin, 2008)

- Nochlin, Linda, 'Morisot's The Wet Nurse' in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude (Nashville, TN: Westview Press, 1992)
- . 'Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 21, No. 8, (15 April 1999)
- O'Brien, Mary, 'The Dialectics of Reproduction' in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Toronto, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2007), 49-87.
- Oakley, Anne, *Housewife* (London: Allen Lane, 1974)
- Olson, Liesl, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- Padiyar, Satish, 'Notes on Writing as Vertigo', *Art History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 2011), 412-422.
- Parker, Rosika, *The Subversive Stitch* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010)
- Pease, Allison, *Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)
- Perloff, Marjorie, 'The Mina Loy Mysteries: Legend and Language,' *American Book Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1996), 26- 41.
- Perry, Gillian, *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde: modernism and 'feminine' art 1900 to the late 1920s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995)
- Perry, Lara, 'The Artist's Household: On Gender and the Division of Artistic and Domestic Labour in Nineteenth-Century London', *Third Text: Social Reproduction and Art*, Vol. 31, No. 1, (2017), 15-29.
- Phillips, Adam, *Attention Seeking* (London: Penguin, 2019)
- . 'On Interest,' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 18, No. 12, (20 June 1996).
- Piaget, Jean, *The Essential Piaget*, ed. Howard E. Gruber (Maryland: Jason Aronson, 1995)
- Pollock, Griselda, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity' in *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2003), 70-127.
- . *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2003)

- Power, Nina, 'Motherhood in France: Towards a Queer Maternity?', *Paragraph*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (2012), 254-264.
- Prettejohn, Elizabeth, *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* (Manchester: Manchester, 1999)
- Puri, Tara, 'Fabricating Intimacy: Reading the Dressing Room in Victorian Literature,' *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 41, No. 3, (2013), 503-525.
- Rainey, Lawrence, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998)
- Raitt, Suzanne, 'Lesbian Modernism?' *GLQ*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (2003), 111-121.
- Rancière, Jacques *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. by Gabriel Rockhill (London Bloomsbury, 2003)
- Rault, Jasmine, 'Designing Sapphic Modernity,' *Interiors*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (2010), 29-43.
- Reed, Christopher, *Bloomsbury Rooms: modernism, subculture and domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004)
- Rendell, Jane, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010)
- Rich, Adrienne, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976)
- . 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,' *College English*, Vol. 34, No.1 (October 1972), 18-30.
- Rifkin, Adrian, *Ingres: Then, and Now* (London: Routledge, 2000)
- Robbins, Bruce, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1986)
- Roche, Hannah, *The Outside Thing: Modernist Lesbian Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019)
- Roe, Sue, *Gwen John: A Life* (London: Vintage, 2002)
- Rohy, Valerie 'AHISTORICAL,' *GLQ*, Vol. 12, No.1, (2006), 61-83.

- Rosner, Victoria, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005)
- Rowell, Margit, *Objects of Desire: the modern still life* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1997)
- Ruddick, Sara 'Maternal Thinking' in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* ed. Andrea O'Reilly (London: Demeter Press, 2007), 96-113.
- Sackville-West Vita, *The Edwardians* (London: Vintage, 2017)
- Schor, Mira, 'Modest Painting' in *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics and Daily Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 134-160.
- Schor, Naomi, *Reading in Detail: aesthetics and the feminine* (London: Methuen, 2007)
- Scott, David, 'Boxing and Art,' *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 4, (December 2019), 303-323.
- Seaton, Beverly, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995)
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Durham: NC, Duke University Press, 1990)
- . 'How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay' in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 154-165.
- . 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes' in *The Weather in Proust* (Durham: Durham University Press, 2011), 123-143.
- . 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,' in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151.
- . 'Queer and Now' in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 2-20.
- Seligman, Isabel, *Lines of Thought* (London: Thames and Hudson)
- Shawna Ross, 'The Last Bluebell: Anthropocenic Mourning in the Brontës' Flower Imagery' *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature*, Vol.134, No.1, (2018), 218-233.

- Shepherd, Sue, *The Surprising Life of Constance Spry* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2011)
- Shiach, Morag, 'Modernism, the City and the Domestic Interior,' *Home Cultures*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2005), 251-67.
- Sickert, Walter Richard 'Idealism', in *The Camden Town Group in Context*, ed. by Helena Bonett, Ysanne Holt, and Jennifer Mundy, *Tate Research Publication*, (May 2012), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/walter-richard-sickert-idealism-r1104279>.
- Souhami, Diana, *Gluck: Her Biography* (London: Quercus Press, 2013)
- Spalding, Frances, *British Art Since 1900* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987)
- . *Vanessa Bell* (London: Harcourt, 1985)
- Spawls, Alice, 'At Dulwich.' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 39, No.10 (18th May 2017)
- Stasi, Paul, *Modernism, Imperialism and the Historical Sense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)
- Stein, Gertrude, *Picasso* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1938)
- Stephenson, Andrew, 'Refashioning modern masculinity: Whistler, aestheticism and national identity', in *English Art 1860–1914: Modernities and Identities*, ed. by David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 217–50
- Stewart, Kathleen, 'Weak Theory in an Unfinished World', *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 45, No. 1, (2008), 71-82.
- Stewart, Susan, *On Longing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992)
- Storr, Robert, *Modern Art Despite Modernism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000)
- Sugg Ryan, Deborah, 'Constance Spry: A Millionaire for a Few Pence,' *Home Cultures*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (2005), 123-130.
- . 'Towards an Uncensored History of Design: Ideal Homes and Constance Spry at The Design Museum, London' in *Design Objects and the Museum*, ed. by Liz Farrely, Joanna Weddell, Leah Armstrong (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 51-60.

Suleiman, Susan Rubin, 'A Double Margin: Reflections on Women Writers and the Avant-Garde in France', *Yale French Studies*, No. 75, 'The Politics of Tradition: Placing Women in French Literature' (1988), pp. 148-172

Thacker, Andrew, *Geographies of Modernism: Literature, Cultures, Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2005)

Thane, Pat and Evans, Tanya, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

Thomas, Alison, *Portraits of Women* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994)

Tinkler, Penny, 'Sapphic Smokers and English Modernities' in *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture*, ed. Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 75-90.

Tobin, Claudia *Modernism and Still Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020)

Todd, Selina, 'Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain 1900-1950,' *Past & Present*, Vol. 203, No.1, (2009), 181-204.

———. *Young women, work and family in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Traub, Valerie, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Turner, Sarah Victoria, 'Muscular Modernism', in 'In Focus: 'Wrestlers' 1914, cast 1965, by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska,' *Tate Research Publication*, (July 2013), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/gaudier-brzeska-wrestlers/muscular-modernism-r1142323>.

Van Haitisma, Pamela, 'Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology for Queer and Feminist Historiography,' *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (2016), 135-147.

Vere, Bernard, "'BLAST SPORT'?: Vorticism, Sport and William Roberts's Boxers', *modernism/modernity*, Vol. 24, No.2, (2017), 349-370.

Vicinus, Martha, *Intimate Friends: women who loved women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004)

Vickery, Amanda, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009)

- Wachman, Gay, *Lesbian Empire: Radical Crosswriting in the Twenties* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001)
- Warden, Claire, “‘Queer Music-Hall Sport’: All-In Wrestling and Modernist Fakery,” *modernism / modernity*, Vol. 27, No.1, (2020), 147-164.
- Warner, Marina, *Alone of all her Sex*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Williams, Raymond, ‘Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism’, in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. by Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1996), 37-48.
- . *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989)
- Wilson, Elizabeth, *The sphinx in the city: urban life, the control of disorder, and women* (Oakland, CA: The University of California Press, 1992)
- Wilton, Tamsin, *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002)
- Winnicott, Donald, ‘Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,’ in *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005)
- Winning, Joanne, ‘Love and the Art Object’ in *Modernism and Affect*, ed. Julie Taylor (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 111-130.
- Witham, Larry *Picasso and the Chess Player* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2012)
- Wolfe, Jesse, *Bloomsbury, Modernism and the Reinvention of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)
- Wolff, Janet, ‘Artist and the Flaneur: Rodin, Rilke and Gwen John in Paris’, in *The Flaneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994), 111-137.
- Wolfhal, Diana, ‘Foregrounding the Background: Images of Dutch and Flemish Household Servants,’ in *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, ed. Sarah Joan Moran, Amanda Pipkin (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), 229-266.
- Woolf, Virginia and Bell, Anne Olivier, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol.1, 1915-1919* (London: Hogarth, 1977)
- . *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 2: 1920-24* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979)

- . *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3: 1925-30* (London: Mariner Books, 1981)
- . *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 4: 1931-35* (London: Mariner Books, 1983)
- Woolf, Virginia and Bell, Vanessa, *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell, with a foreword by Virginia Woolf* (London: The London Artist's Association, March 1930)
- Woolf, Virginia, *Moments of Being: unpublished autobiographical writings* ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976)
- . *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Granada Publishing, 1976)
- . 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2009), 67-75.
- . 'Professions for Women' in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140-145.
- . 'The Lady in the Looking Glass', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction* (New York: HMH Books, 1989), 221-5.
- . *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: 1911-1922*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: Mariner Press, 1978)
- . *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)
- . *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008)
- . 'Walter Sickert: A Conversation', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume 6: 1933-1941* (London: Random House, 2011)
- . 'Women and Fiction' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume 5, 1929-1932*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 28-36.
- Zapperi, Giovanna, 'Marcel Duchamp's Tonsure: Towards an alternate masculinity,' *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (2007), 291-303.
- Zerilli, Linda M. G. 'A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity', *Signs*, Vol.18, No.1, (1992), 111-135.

