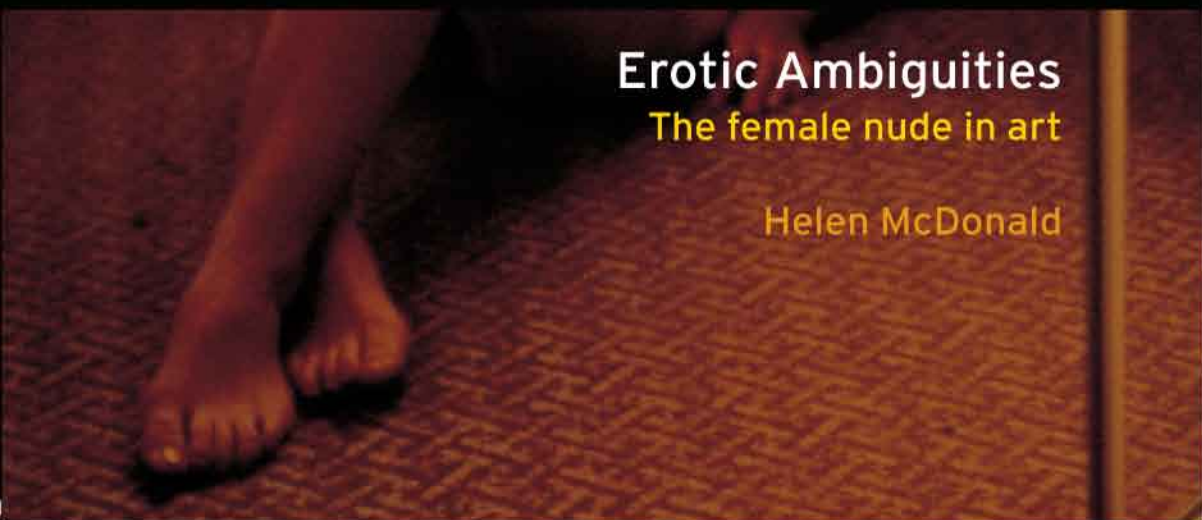




Erotic Ambiguities
The female nude in art

Helen McDonald



EROTIC AMBIGUITIES

Art is always ambiguous. When it involves the female body it can also be erotic. *Erotic Ambiguities* is a study of how contemporary women artists have reconceptualised the figure of the female nude. Helen McDonald shows how, over the past thirty years, artists have employed the idea of ambiguity to dismantle the exclusive, classical ideal enshrined in the figure of the nude, and how they have broadened the scope of the ideal to include differences of race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability as well as gender.

McDonald discusses the work of a wide range of women artists, including Barbara Kruger, Judy Chicago, Mary Duffy, Zoe Leonard, Tracey Moffatt, Pat Brassington and Sally Smart. She traces the shift in feminist art practices from the early challenge to patriarchal representations of the female nude to contemporary, 'postfeminist' practices, influenced by theories of performativity, queer theory and postcoloniality. McDonald argues that feminist efforts to develop a more positive representation of the female body need to be reconsidered, in the face of the resistant ambiguities and hybrid complexities of visual art in the late 1990s.

Helen McDonald is an Honorary Fellow in the School of Fine Arts, Classical Studies and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne.

EROTIC AMBIGUITIES

The female nude in art

Helen McDonald



London and New York

First published 2001
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017
Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group
© 2001 Helen McDonald
Typeset in Galliard by
Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

McDonald, Helen, 1949–
Erotic ambiguities : the female nude in art /
Helen McDonald.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Female nude in art. 2. Feminism in art. 3. Gender
identity in art. 4. Women artists—Psychology. I. Title.

N7573 .M39 2000
704.9'424—dc21 00-032184

ISBN 0-415-17098-2 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-17099-0 (pbk)

IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER
CHARLES

CONTENTS

<i>List of plates</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1 Feminism, ambiguity and the ideal	7
2 Re-visioning the female nude	31
3 Historical ambiguity	53
4 Seeing ambiguity	75
5 Gender ambiguity	99
6 Making a difference with ambiguity	130
7 Turning ambiguity around	160
8 Hybrid ambiguities	187
Conclusion	218
<i>Notes</i>	231
<i>References</i>	234
<i>Index</i>	240

PLATES

1	Barbara Kruger, <i>Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)</i>	18
2	<i>Bad Girls: the media, sex and feminism in the 90s</i>	37
3	Jane Burton, <i>Two or three things I know about her</i>	40
4	Fiona Foley, <i>Native Blood</i>	41
5	<i>Untitled (Aborigine, Fraser Island)</i>	44
6	Mary Duffy, <i>Cutting the Ties that Bind</i>	46
7	Zoe Leonard, <i>Pin-up # 1 (Jennifer Miller Does Marilyn Monroe)</i>	48
8	Jusepe de Ribera, <i>Magdalena Ventura with Her Husband</i>	49
9	Zoe Leonard, <i>Preserved Head of Bearded Woman</i>	51
10	Michael Bianchino, <i>Spirit Women</i>	55
11	Nicolas Petit, <i>Portrait of a 'jeune femme de la tribu des Cam-Mer-Ray-Gal de Nouvelle Galles Du Sud'</i>	56
12	Peter Paul Rubens, <i>The Three Graces</i>	59
13	Annibale Carracci, <i>Perseus and Andromeda</i>	60
14	Titian, <i>Diana and Actaeon</i>	60
15	Sydney Long, <i>The Music Lesson</i>	72
16	Sydney Long, <i>The Spirit of the Plains</i>	73
17	Judy Chicago, <i>Peeling Back</i>	84
18	<i>Test-tube baby (and reversal)</i>	86
19	<i>The Face</i> , front cover	87
20	Linda Dement, <i>Self and Gun</i>	94
21	Zoe Leonard, <i>Untitled Installation at Neue Galerie</i>	95
22	Susan Norrie, <i>Inquisition</i>	96
23	Linda Sproul, <i>Which Side do you Dress?</i>	105
24	Jane Trengove, <i>Sex Fluffies</i>	117
25	Della Grace, <i>Jack's Back</i>	119
26	Della Grace, <i>Hermaphrodite Torso</i>	120
27	Linda Sproul, <i>Difficult to Light</i>	125
28	<i>'Ellen', seated</i>	128
29	Lesley Sanderson, <i>Time for a Change</i>	132
30	Lorna Simpson, <i>Hypothetical?</i>	135
31	Rea, <i>Definitions of Difference</i>	140

32	Cathy Freeman at the Commonwealth Games, Canada, 1994	142
33	Destiny Deacon, <i>Indigene</i>	144
34	Destiny Deacon, <i>Welcome to my island</i>	145
35	Destiny Deacon, <i>Last laughs</i>	146
36	Destiny Deacon, <i>No fixed dress</i>	147
37	Destiny Deacon, <i>Teatowel – Dance little lady</i>	150
38	Destiny Deacon, <i>Being there</i>	150
39	Destiny Deacon, <i>Me and Carol</i>	151
40	Chris Barry, <i>Requiem</i>	153
41	Chris Barry, <i>Looking for the Child</i>	154
42	Kate Beynon, <i>Old Poem with Unbound Feet</i>	155
43	Kate Beynon, <i>Shoes for Bound Feet with Unbound Feet</i>	156
44	Kate Beynon, <i>Li Ji</i>	157
45	Jane Trengove, <i>Self-Portrait in Bright Blue</i>	158
46	Tracey Moffatt, <i>Pet Thang, 4</i>	164
47	Man Ray, <i>Anatomies</i>	166
48	Max Ernst, <i>Une Semaine de Bonté</i>	169
49	Sally Smart, <i>The Unhomely Body</i>	170
50	Sally Smart, <i>Self-Portrait (with organs)</i>	173
51	Paul Delvaux, <i>L'Echo</i>	174
52	Jenny Kemp, <i>The Black Sequin Dress</i>	174
53	Susan Fereday, <i>Untitled</i>	177
54	Zoe Leonard, <i>Frontal View Geoffrey Beene Fashion Show</i>	179
55	Linda Dement, <i>Fur Gash</i>	179
56	Pat Brassington, <i>Memory: Au Rebours</i>	180
57	Pat Brassington, <i>In My Father's House</i>	182
58	Pat Brassington, <i>Akimbo</i>	184
59	Pat Brassington, <i>Drink Me</i>	184
60	Pat Brassington, <i>Lisp</i>	184
61	Stelarc, <i>The Third Hand</i>	190
62	Stelarc, <i>Stomach Sculpture: Hollow Body/Host Space</i>	191
63	Stelarc, <i>Amplified Body, Laser Eyes and Third Hand</i>	191
64	Orlan, <i>Omniprésence</i>	194
65	Linda Dement, still from <i>Cyberflesh Girlmonster</i>	199
66	Patricia Piccinini, <i>Love Me Love My Lump</i>	200
67	Patricia Piccinini, <i>Protein Lattice</i>	202
68	Tracey Moffatt, <i>Up in the Sky, 1</i>	207
69	Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, <i>The Philosopher</i>	208
70	Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, <i>Face à l'Histoire Part 4</i>	211
71	Lesley Sanderson and Neil Conroy, <i>Fabrication and Reality</i>	212
72	Narelle Jubelin, (<i>and hence rewritten</i>)	214
73	Justin Smith, <i>Untitled</i>	221
74	Bill Henson, <i>Untitled</i>	222

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the University of Melbourne for awarding me a post-doctoral fellowship for women with career interruptions. This award enabled me to work with staff and students in the University's Department of Fine Arts and Cinema Studies between 1993 and 1995, during which time the plan for this book began to take shape. I am also grateful to Rebecca Barden for considering my initial proposal and offering me a contract, for without it I might not have been able to proceed towards the book's completion. For early encouragement and valuable professional advice I am indebted to Julie Gibbs, Margaret Manion and Freya Mathews, and for later advice I am thankful to Patty Brown. Virginia Fraser and Fiona Nicoll read excerpts from the chapter 'Making a Difference with Ambiguity', and I greatly appreciate their astute comments. Norbert Loeffler, Nicky McDonald, Sue Russell, Jenepher Duncan, Robert Gaston, Lutz Presser, Pierrette Dudley-Hill, George Szmukler, Barbara Creed, Lynda Nead, Jeanette Hoorn and Jaynie Anderson were generous with addresses and bibliographical assistance, while Amanda Stuart kindly advised me on the translation of Italian. Many people from various institutions cheerfully provided me with assistance in obtaining illustrations, permissions and details of information. These busy people included Anna Ward, Miranda Francis, Catherine Gallagher, Fiona Moore, Domenica Chincarini, Paula Feldman, Rachel Young, Vicki McInnes, Sarrah Preuhs, Russell Storer, Nicola Vance, Esther Pierini, Juliana Engberg, Irene Sutton, Stephen Mori, Roslyn Oxley and Dermot McCall. At Routledge, Christopher Cudmore, Alistair Daniel, Julianne Tschinkel and Maggy Hendry responded helpfully to my queries. I especially thank Rebecca Barden and the anonymous readers for their suggestions on improving the manuscript. For frequent assistance with computer and communications technology, and for the formatting of the final draft before submission, I am beholden to John Clarke, and to Lorin and Lucia Clarke for their goodwill and forbearance. I am particularly indebted to Jean McDonald, who assisted indefatigably with tedious practical tasks, such as keeping records of permission correspondences, and with moral support. Finally, with a book such as this, the co-operation between the author and the artists whose work is discussed in the text is crucial. Although they may not agree with my general argument when they see it in

print, the artists whose work is reviewed in the following pages were extremely helpful in providing me with the most important insights that this book offers.

The author and the publisher wish to thank the following copyright holders for their permission to reproduce the illustrations appearing in this book. [Plate 1](#) Courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York; [Plate 2](#) Courtesy Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd; [Plates 3a, b, c, d](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 4](#) Courtesy of the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; [Plate 5](#) Courtesy Fiona Foley; [Plates 6a, b, c](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 7](#) Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; [Plate 9](#) Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery; [Plate 10](#) by permission of Aanya Whitehead; [Plate 11](#) by permission of the Museum d'Histoire Naturelle du Havre; [Plate 12](#) Courtesy Museo del Prado, Madrid; [Plate 14](#) by permission of the Duke of Sutherland and the National Gallery of Scotland; [Plate 15](#) by permission of the Ophthalmic Research Institute of Australia and the Art Gallery of New South Wales; [Plate 16](#) by permission from the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; [Plate 17](#) © Judy Chicago 1974 Photograph © Donald Woodman; [Plate 18](#) by permission of Bayer; [Plate 19](#) by permission of *The Face*, UK; [Plate 20](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 21](#) Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; [Plates 22a, b, c, d](#) by permission of the artist; [Plates 23a, b, c, d, e, f, g](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 24](#) by permission of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne; [Plates 25, 26](#) by permission of the artist; [Plates 27a, b, c, d](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 28](#) Courtesy Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland; [Plate 29](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 30](#) Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; [Plate 31](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 32](#) Courtesy Allsport Australia; [Plates 33, 34, 35, 36a, b, 37, 38, 39](#) by permission of the artist; [Plates 40, 41](#) by permission of the artist; [Plates 42a, b](#) by permission of the artist; [Plates 43, 44](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 45](#) by permission of the artist and Sutton Gallery; [Plate 46](#) Courtesy of the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; [Plates 47, 48](#) by permission of Viscopy Ltd., Sydney; [Plates 49a, b, c](#) and [50](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 51](#) by permission of Viscopy Ltd., Sydney, 1998; [Plate 52](#) by permission of the playwright/director and the photographer; [Plate 53a](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 54](#) Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; [Plate 55](#) by permission of the artist; [Plates 56, 57a, b, 58, 59, 60](#) by permission of the artist; [Plates 61, 62, 63](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 64](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 65](#) by permission of the artist; [Plates 66a, b, c](#) and [67a, b, c, d, e](#) by permission of the artist; [Plate 68](#) Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; [Plates 69, 70](#) by permission of the artists; [Plate 71](#) by permission of the artists; [Plate 72](#) Courtesy the artist, Fabric Workshop Museum Philadelphia, Mori Gallery, Sydney, and the photographer; [Plate 73](#) Courtesy *Australian Style* magazine; [Plates 74a, b, c](#) by permission of the artist.

INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as the ideal female body. Even the old masters would have agreed that an ideal is a concept not a thing. Some of the famous nudes in art history were thought to be near-perfect configurations of the ideal female form. For instance, *Venus de Milo* was sculpted for the citizens of Ancient Greece according to the Classical ideal of bodily perfection, and nearly 2,000 years later, Botticelli's *Venus of Urbino* was painted as a Renaissance version of this ideal for the Medici princes. Executed in a representational style, both works of art served for centuries as interpretations of the ideal, and were endlessly copied in art. Popular fashion and pornography provided a succession of specific cultural fantasies of the female body, which ran parallel to and intersected with this high-art industry. In being sanctified as art, however, 'the nude' became singular, academic, historical and exclusive, a myth that was disqualified as a standard that might be applied to living bodies.

In our own century, the goddesses of the silver screen displaced this high-art tradition, adding voice, movement and the illusion of a closer link to real bodies, while seducing mass audiences on an unprecedented scale. Despite their international fame, few stars from this glittering constellation stand out or are remembered as approximating to the ideal. This may be because movies fracture the woman's body to focus on the face or some erotic part, or because even film stars are condemned to be victims of changing fashion, tarnished with the aura of mortality. Occasionally, as in the case of Marilyn Monroe, who was acclaimed as the ideal of her day, personal tragedy and premature death confirmed this aura. It was as though the designation or symbolisation of a woman's body as ideal forced recognition that her body was only too real and particular, a material fact that would soon 'turn to dust'. In spite of this – or perhaps because of it – Marilyn's image achieved the status of a myth. It was repeated in the prints of Andy Warhol and simulated in the performances of Madonna, thus spawning ever-new formations of iconic, feminine beauty.

Though nudes may belong to history and film stars may be destined for the graveyards of the rich and famous, now fashion magazines, video clips and other forms of popular visual culture dominate unchecked as the purveyors of body image. The 'ideal female body' has become a marketing strategy, and as such

it has made international corporations richer than any Ancient Greek or Renaissance prince. Women still try to improve their bodies, but instead of emulating a goddess or saint, they 'work out' according to a promotional theme. Sanctioned by medical science, the 'fit body' drives an industry of gymnasias and sporting products, while 'the healthy body' sustains a vast range of pharmaceutical and health-care products. The 'beautiful body' adds cosmetics and plastic surgery to both of these. Sometimes the themes clash or become confused. Jane Fonda's 'fit body', for example, turned out to be bulimic and therefore not healthy. 'The healthy body', it seems, was not slim enough to qualify also as 'the beautiful body'. It is in the interests of late capitalism to perpetuate this sort of ambiguity, to promote thinness in a culture where obesity is more common and the weight-loss industry prospers. The slim, fit body has become a symbol of self-discipline, and a passport to social and cultural power, but the control required of the individual to maintain it comes at a cost. By inducing women to strive with all their purchasing power towards an ideal that is difficult, elusive and obscure, capitalism ensures that the threat of failure is maintained and the purchasing is never exhausted. On the other hand, recognising that achieving this ideal is more difficult for some than for others, it adjusts the ideal to be more global and inclusive, thus breaking down sexual and cultural boundaries. The promotion of 'the anorectic body', 'the waif', 'the heroin body', and 'the dead body' is the perverse side to this inclusiveness.

Running parallel to this discourse on the ideal female body is a shorter narrative of resistance. Feminist artists have challenged the patriarchal ideal in art as well as commercial norms of feminine beauty. In the 1960s and 1970s, some attempted to replace the Classical ideal of the female body with a positive, feminist ideal, symbolising it with images of the archaic goddess whose maternal body was tied spiritually and essentially to Nature and the Earth. While these images were powerful in some ways, it was not long before they looked anachronistic and crude. Intellectually sophisticated, contemporary women of the early 1980s were uncomfortable with the murky namelessness of maternity, which many of them associated with the sentimentality of regressive artistic modes, particularly painting. These mainly poststructuralist feminists took a different line of attack, re-deploying techniques and images from popular media as well as from modernist art to deconstruct images that had been constructed according to the 'patriarchal' ideal. Barbara Kruger defaced patriarchal representations of the female body in order to obstruct the (male) gaze of the spectator, but did not indicate a positive viewing position for women, or an artistic direction that might lead to positive representations of the female body. Positivity itself was distrusted, as was the sense of sight that established an image or the thing it represents as real.

This was not a crisis for the visual arts so much as a crisis for representation and for the status of the real. It was said that Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills* showed that her self-presentations, as 'woman', were constituted in and produced by images in the visual media and popular culture, that they were not constructed

from reality through representation, but were instead simulations that had no attachment to reality. Sherman counted herself as a performance artist, however, and managed to keep the body in art, emphasising the processes of making and enactment. Some artists, such as Karen Finley, used their bodies-in-performance to displace the patriarchal ideal, by resisting stereotypes of femininity and transgressing gendered constructions of the female body. In staging the 'obscene body', and joking about it, 'bad girls' wanted to have it both ways: to shatter binaries but 'reclaim' their bodies and erotic power.

A new typology of ambiguous bodies emerged: the 'androgynous body', the 'hybrid body', the 'abject body' and the 'post-human body'. These exposed the constructedness of femininity, the performativity of gender and sex, and the hollowness of identity as an ideal. The irony of this feminist narrative, however, is that the women who were opposed to the death of identity were often not patriarchal idealists, but those whom feminism should want to defend. Artists who are positioned as 'Other', on account of their race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability or physical difference asserted 'their own' identities in political statements against the white, middle-class norm. On the other hand it has been argued that with the advances of technology and the globalisation of culture, hybridisation collapses the old distinctions based on race, class and sexuality, and renders obsolete that which was once human. Hence, while some feminist artists sought to foreground the real in some new way, cyberfeminists and post-humanists redefined the ideal of a female body as one that transcends binaries and embraces artificiality through fiction.

Although this book does not insist that the above narratives about the female body in representation are either correct or comprehensive, it uses them as a provisional framework for the analysis of contemporary art, and raises questions about them that are kept in suspension. Both narratives have three themes in common: power, idealism and ambiguity. In the first, the themes are positively aligned, since both idealism and ambiguity service the demands of capitalist power. In the second, where the alliance between patriarchal, capitalist power and idealism is under attack by feminists, ambiguity is foregrounded. This ambiguity renders uncertain the status of feminist art production as a counternarrative and it risks pushing the art towards either morbidity or utopian fantasy. Rather than always figuring them as narratives in binary opposition to one another, therefore, I propose a more productive reading of these two histories that does not run the risk of constructing feminism as a failed metanarrative in relation to the victorious metanarrative of capitalist marketing. Instead, I suggest that the dialectical tensions between these parallel and intersecting discourses on the ideal female body have in the 1980s and 1990s produced results that in the 1960s and 1970s were unpredictable, including even some benefits for female consumers from the democratisation of sexuality in fashion and pornography.

My principal concern however is to stress that, over the past thirty years or so, feminism has played a positive role in cultural production, which post-structuralist relativism, with its anti-idealism and foregrounding of rupture and

discontinuity, has in the 1980s and early 1990s sometimes tended to obscure. When feminist art production is seen as not only reactive but also as a positive process in formation then it becomes clear that the art has proceeded in this way according to a feminist ideal for the female body – not a representational ideal, to replace the *Venus de Milo* or Madonna, but a conceptual ideal, based on a principle of inclusiveness, of an erotically appealing female body. It becomes clear, too, that this was not an intentional ideal in the sense that an artist or a group necessarily and consciously intended it. It was an ideal that emerged in relation to feminism as part of the processes and conditions of art production. If it could be acknowledged that most contemporary art by women has developed along these lines, then feminists might be in a better position to assess ethical questions, and what was being sacrificed or refused in the deliberate ambiguity and undecidability of so-called postfeminist art in the late 1990s.

While focusing on the female body in art, this book considers the way in which visual art produced by women was informed by feminism. It is based on the view that contemporary feminism is a coalition of various conflicting feminisms that are neither co-extensive nor independent, but which act collectively to inform contemporary art practices. While a similar case could be made for the processes that have led to the democratisation of sexuality in pornography and fashion marketing, the current book does not develop this point of view. It acknowledges, however, that the inevitable ambiguities and discontinuities which are entailed in this process of feminist information complicate questions of chronology and intention, and that art is always ambiguous, never one thing or another. As representation, art stands between artist and spectator, subject and object, form and matter, concept and thing. As text it hovers at the borders of categories, and as simulacrum it is subsumed in a field of images that bear no relation to ‘reality’. If viewed in psychological terms, it is a point of mediation between the self and an ‘other’. In bodily and social terms, it is a prosthetic, an extension of the body and a point of intercession between one living body and another, and therefore a mediator in sexual relations. In this last sense, art is also always erotic, especially in the form of the naked female body: hence the book’s title, *Erotic Ambiguities*.

Ambiguity in art, and the way artists and feminist critics negotiate ambiguity in their cultural practices is a principal theme in this book. Accordingly, the first four chapters explore ways in which ambiguity has complicated feminist art criticism over the past twenty to thirty years.

Chapter 1, entitled ‘Feminism, Ambiguity and the Ideal’, is introductory in that it foreshadows the argument and structure of the book, and describes some of the theories referred to therein. It outlines art historical literature on idealism and the female nude in art, various historical, psychoanalytic and philosophical explanations for the erotic ambiguity of visual representations of the female body, and the implications of ambiguity for feminist politics.

Chapter 2, entitled ‘Re-visioning the Female Nude’, reviews the 1980s ‘sex wars’ about pornography and ‘images of women’, the pleasure versus danger

controversy amongst feminists, and the effect of these debates on the visual arts. Against this background, it posits the critical re-visioning of the female nude in art by women artists, as a paradigmatic application of the feminist ideal that informs contemporary art production. Using four examples, it shows how this process of re-visioning the ideal female body entailed, not only the deconstruction of the Classical ideal, and therefore the foregrounding of ambiguity, but also an implicit proposal for a new, inclusive conceptual ideal of an erotically appealing body.

[Chapter 3](#), entitled ‘Historical Ambiguity’, considers the implications of historicism, demonstrating how deconstructive criticism is useful for focusing on ambiguity to expose how traditional images of the female nude were framed historically in ‘sexist’ and ‘racist’ terms, but that in so doing it foregrounds ambiguity as negative.

[Chapter 4](#), entitled ‘Seeing Ambiguity’, shows how this devaluation of ambiguity was accompanied by a distrust of the sense of sight, which Martin Jay has called the antiocularcentrism of French thought. It cites various theories about the ambiguity of visual art – most of which, but not all, posit a link between language and vision – as a prelude to reviewing the related, anti-visual arguments of deconstructive feminists against 1970s vaginal imagery and body art. It shows that these arguments are not always convincing, especially in the light of the democratisation, or feminisation, of sexuality in body images in advertising over the past twenty years. Analysing some contemporary, feminist 1990s art that questions, defies or refuses the antiocularcentric feminist theory of the 1980s, this chapter concludes that, in these instances, ambiguity in visual art is oriented towards a positive conception of the female body.

The second half of the book continues the theme of ambiguity, but concentrates more on the ways it was navigated in particular visual modes and artistic practices from the late 1980s to the late 1990s. [Chapter 5](#), entitled ‘Gender Ambiguity’, registers a shift from deconstructive techniques of early 1980s gender feminism to Judith Butler’s feminist critique of gender identity as a category and an ideal. It analyses art and criticism that engages with issues that Butler raised, as well as aspects of queer theory and notions of gender ambiguity, and it considers favourably a recommendation for the adoption of ‘the performative approach’ to the analysis of the way gender and race are enacted. At the same time, it points out that the processes by which ‘performativity’ is represented, or presented as art, are often orientated towards a feminist ideal.

[Chapter 6](#), entitled ‘Making a Difference with Ambiguity’, demonstrates that, while queer theory critiques identity, political art that argues for difference on the basis of identitarian claims cannot be refused. Such art does not deny ambiguity, but negotiates and often exploits it, and while feminism is sometimes tangential to these negotiations, it is nevertheless implicated in them in such a way as to orient ambiguity towards a positive conception of the female body.

The next two chapters consider various visual modes and contexts in which artists have negotiated ambiguity productively in relation to feminist concerns.

Chapter 7, entitled ‘Turning Ambiguity Around’, examines art by women, which pushes ambiguity, as it appeared in surrealist art and Dada, away from negativity towards the possibility of positive representations of the female body. It also considers how this trend developed in conjunction with an interest in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and Kristeva’s theory of abjection.

Chapter 8, entitled ‘Hybrid Ambiguities’, focuses on art in the 1990s that probes ambiguity in its speculations on hybridisation, the globalisation of culture and the impact of new technologies on categories of art and identity. It argues that, while feminism impinges on these artistic projects, it provokes questions that are often left open, pending consideration of ethical concerns.

In summary, this book proposes that art is always ambiguous, especially when it involves the female body. Chapters 1 to 4 develop this argument from theoretical, historical and methodological perspectives, showing that early feminist deconstructions of representation attached a negative value to ambiguity. Chapters 5 and 6 describe the ambivalence that runs through contemporary feminist art production, considering, on the one hand, art and theory that asserts that gender identity is groundless and ‘performative’, and on the other, political and identitarian art that employs universalist and essentialist terms ‘strategically’. These chapters, plus Chapters 7 and 8 propose, on the basis of particular examples, that feminist art practices, in spite of their deconstructive techniques, have negotiated ambiguity according to a conceptual ideal for the female body that is based on a principle of inclusiveness.

The Conclusion does not attempt to predict a future for the ideal. Instead, it returns to the problem for feminism, announced in this introduction, of how to address the ambiguity produced by the conflicting ideals of the female body proposed by advertising and pornography on the one hand and feminist art on the other. It outlines this problem by analysing particular images in which art and advertising are ambiguously implicated with one another in the eroticisation of young adolescent girls. By alluding to the ethical concerns raised by these examples, it invites speculation on the wisdom of possible dissolution or abandonment of the ideal, as against the desirability of maintaining it.

FEMINISM, AMBIGUITY AND THE IDEAL

Nakedness is the most potent visual sign that a body is available for sexual encounter with another body. Since art stands between the artist and the spectator, it might be argued that art that represents the naked body serves the artist both as a sexual lure and as a shield against intimacy.¹ This might explain why the female nude has given rise to an astonishing variety of ambiguities related to the construction of gender and identity. In the history of European art, ambiguities clouded, veiled or permeated representations of the female body, rendering their meaning opaque or transparent. As a consequence, the female nude became the most fascinating and disturbing symbol in Western visual culture. For centuries artists refined and exploited it, while art-lovers succumbed to and were shocked by it. Psychoanalysts and feminists, however, were the first to probe the ambiguity of its erotic appeal.

Questions of sexuality were not acknowledged in traditional art history, let alone addressed in a systematic way. Interpretative frameworks of commentators such as Gombrich and Panofsky, for instance, were indifferent to sexuality and to the ambiguities to which it gives rise, while Kenneth Clark's reference to 'erotic feeling' in *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (1956) reads as an indictment of his rationalist approach (Clark 1957: 6). Clark's first chapter, entitled 'The Naked and the Nude', in which he distinguished between representations of a particular body (the naked) and art that represents an ideal body (the nude), provided a point of departure for most of the recent contributions to the discourse on the female nude in art. John Berger, Griselda Pollock, Marcia Pointon and Lynda Nead, among others, criticised the Enlightenment values that Clark's conceptualisation of the female nude enshrines. Of the examples of recent literature on the female nude in art, some of which I refer to below, a few are books, but most are journal articles or single chapters in books on art, women artists or the female body in representation. All of them, however, have made a considerable impact on feminist thinking about art and the female body.

Reading the female nude in art history

In the TV series and book, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger put a Marxist spin on Clark's formulation by reversing the value of the terms naked/nude. Clark valued the nude over the naked whereas Berger favoured nakedness – to be 'without disguise', above nudity – a 'form of dress' that objectifies 'woman' according to male-dominated, capitalist 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972: 54). In art and girlie magazines alike, argued Berger, women are represented as subordinate, passive objects. Carol Duncan argued along similar lines in 'Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting' (1973), claiming that in the art of the Fauves and German Expressionists, for example, images of powerless, passive, available female nudes served as evidence of the male artist's sexual virility and dominating will. In 'The Esthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art' (1977), she described such images as expressions of a 'cultural symptom', thus using Panofsky's term to explain that eroticism was not inherent in modernist nudes but was an effect of the cultural circumstances that produced them. At the same time, Griselda Pollock's article, 'What's wrong with images of women?' (1977), pointed up the 'asymmetry' between meanings attached to images of (nude)'woman' and (nude)'man' in contemporary visual culture. In *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981), Pollock and Rosika Parker developed the theory that 'images reproduce on the ideological level of art the relations of power between men and women' (Parker and Pollock 1981: 116). Of the female nude in art they said:

As female nude, woman is body, is nature opposed to male culture, which, in turn, is represented by the very act of transforming nature, that is, the female model or motif, into the ordered forms and colour of a cultural artefact, a *work* of art.

(Parker and Pollock 1981: 119)

Also concerned with the ideological level of art, T.J. Clark discussed the nude in relation to the ambiguities of Manet's *Olympia* (1865) and nineteenth-century notions of female sexuality and class. In *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (1985), Clark suggested that in departing from the conventions of the traditional nude in art Olympia's nakedness, at that time, signified the working class.

Rosemary Betterton's *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media* includes essays that reflect debates in the 1970s and 1980s about constructs of 'femininity' in pornography, the popular media and visual art. In her own essay, for instance, Betterton argued that the early modernist artist, Suzanne Valadon, 'demystified' the female nude with her particularised versions of it by challenging 'the idea that nakedness is essence, an irreducible quality of the "Eternal Feminine"' (Betterton 1989: 230). In the same book, Lisa Tickner argued that it was possible for contemporary women body artists to

create a female erotica, since 'Art does not just make ideology explicit but can be used, at a particular historical juncture, to rework it' (Tickner 1989: 249). In a 1981 article, entitled 'Where do positive images come from? And what does a woman want?', Australian feminists Helen Grace and Ann Stephen questioned the 'reactive and moralistic' response of feminists 'to pornography and violence, and to mass-media representations of women' (Grace and Stephen 1994: 81). Also during the 1980s, raced and gendered constructions of the female nude were investigated in various contexts. Abigail Solomon-Godeau identified 'the invention of primitivist modernism' in the female nudes of Gauguin, arguing that 'what is at stake in the erotics of primitivism is the impulse to domesticate, as well as possess' (Solomon-Godeau 1992: 326). In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), black intellectual, bell hooks, interrogated images of black women in film and popular culture, and the way they are informed by the 'politics of domination' (hooks 1992: 5). Speculating on the future for feminist studies of the female body in Western culture, Susan Rubin Suleiman suggested that it might lie 'somewhere in the direction of blurred gender boundaries', and in the capacity to 'redraw and mix up the lines of differences in new, energizing ways' (Suleiman 1986: 4). In short the extension of the boundaries of art history and the expansion of feminist discourse in the 1980s paralleled a general move away from an exclusive interest in the ideal nudes of traditional art. Feminist attention had turned to representation itself, and to the ways the body is constructed in and produced by representations in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality and physical difference.

In the 1990s, Rosemary Betterton's book, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (1996) showed how feminist theories of embodiment and psychoanalytic theory informed art that is concerned with the female body, its relationship to technology and to 'body horror'. New journals on art and critical theory, such as *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, featured articles on various 'raced', 'hybrid', 'postcolonial' and 'post-human' constructions of the female body. Queer theory informed essays on the body, as in *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* (1995) edited by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn.

Although these and similar 1990s' feminist analyses of embodiment and desire largely displaced criticism of the female nude and idealism, some art historians in the early 1990s assumed the task of reassessing the female nude in art. Marcia Pointon explained, in *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting 1830-1908* (1990), for instance, that Berger's assumption that the 'naked' can be equated with the 'real' is misguided, since the body is always in representation, always culturally encoded. She also claimed that Berger's presumption that there is 'a pre-constructed male viewer in a relationship of opposition and oppression to a female subject is deeply flawed' (1990: 33). She argued, for example, that when Palma Vecchio's *Venus* is studied in its historical context, it is not 'an unambiguous image of woman as passive object of possession', but one which constructs 'woman as a possible site of moral, intellectual and philosophical

enquiry' (1990: 18). Pointon stressed that images are 'not of themselves oppressive', but are complex 'forms of visual rhetoric' which 'may be seen to function in the articulation of power' (1990: 33, 34). Thus rejecting theories of the male gaze, Pointon proposed a notion of 'communication as intersubjectivity', and she aimed to address the affective elements of art (1990: 6).

Also avoiding gaze theory, Lynda Nead's *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (1992) applied Derrida's deconstructive technique, reading the tradition of the female nude, and contemporary visual art, as 'text'. Nead hailed Kenneth Clark's naked/nude distinction as the dualist paradigm that structures not only his thinking in the rest of his text about the ideal female body, but that of Western culture generally. She explained that the notion of ideal forms could be traced from Plato and Aristotle, through the Middle Ages to Descartes in the seventeenth century, then to Kant in the eighteenth century. Plato argued that things that we apprehend through our senses in the empirical world are merely shadows of absolute forms that belong to the ideal world beyond experience. His distinction between base matter and ideal form founded a tradition of dualistic thinking, which, as feminist scholars have convincingly demonstrated, privileges the mind (male) over the body (female). Nead's deconstruction of Clark's naked/nude dichotomy, and of the Kantian aesthetics, which, she showed, inform his conceptualisation, illustrated how this binary opposition is mapped onto the form/matter opposition. It is mapped in turn onto others such as mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, and art/obscenity, all of which are ingrained in the Western psyche, invariably valorising the former term over the latter. This binary model is also the basis for Kant's distinction between the contemplative and sensory pleasures, which, Nead said, underpins a hierarchy of aesthetic experience.

Nead's timely book encapsulated the best of poststructuralist feminist criticism from the previous decade, and I have relied on its lucid explanations as points of departure for my own arguments, including my criticisms of deconstruction. Since the publication of Nead's book, contemporary developments in cultural studies have had an impact on art practices that reference the female body and feminism, which *Erotic Ambiguities* sets out to address. While this book does not align itself with a particular critical method or theory, as Nead's book did, it proposes its own theory that art practices, which referenced the female body and were informed by feminism, were directed towards a feminist ideal. To some readers this proposal might not appear to be a theory at all, let alone the sort of cutting-edge theory that one expects to associate with contemporary art. It might seem to be stating the obvious and the already well known, or to be regressively humanist. In order to justify my approach and to dispel doubts about its validity, therefore, I want first to return to an aspect of Clark's book that Nead ignored.

Clark promoted a particular ideal for the representation of the body, the Classical nude. Although his judgements on beauty were mapped onto the Platonic naked/nude distinction outlined at the beginning of his book, Clark

never mentioned Plato or Kant in the exposition of his argument, and referred to Aristotle only in passing. Instead, he defined the ideal as a framework for the way the nude was conceptualised historically. In fact, he preferred to locate his project within the framework of liberal history rather than in philosophy, for Clark was concerned, above all else, to document the heroic development of Western civilisation as it was enshrined in art. Plato's views were of only limited use to this enterprise, since the Ancient philosopher did not value art highly, believing as he did that all representations are degraded because they deflect attention from the empirical world, which is itself only a shadow of the ideal. Aristotle's view, as Clark summarised it, was similar to Plato's, in that 'everything has an ideal form of which the phenomena of experience are more or less corrupted replicas' (Clark 1957: 9–10). Kant's aesthetics located art within eighteenth-century discourses on beauty and perception, and, as Nead explained, they indirectly inform many of Clark's judgements on art. A deeper philosophical reading of Kant would however reveal that his 'transcendental idealism' was constructed from a position which is so subtle that, as Roger Scruton observed, 'no commentator seems to agree with any other as to what it is' (Scruton 1996: 25).

Like most art historians of his era, Clark was a champion of so-called common sense, and frank about his determination not to 'plunge into a sea of speculation' on philosophical matters (Clark 1957: 10). In stressing the 'practical' aspect of his formalist enterprise, however, Clark conflated the ideal with representation. It is worth quoting in full Clark's preferred definition of the ideal.

Perhaps the question is best answered in Crocean terms. The ideal is like a myth, in which the finished form can be understood only as the end of a long process of accretion. In the beginning no doubt there is the coincidence of widely diffused desires and the personal tastes of a few individuals endowed with the gift of simplifying their visual experiences into easily comprehensible shapes. Once this fusion has taken place, the resulting image, while still in a plastic state, may be enriched or refined upon by succeeding generations. Or, to change the metaphor, it is like a receptacle into which more and more experience can be poured. Then, at a certain point it is full. It sets. And, partly because at a certain point it seems to be completely satisfying, partly because the mythopoeic faculty has declined, it is accepted as true.

(Clark 1957: 11)

This description of the ideal, as 'a myth', 'a comprehensible shape', 'an image', and 'a receptacle for experience', oscillates between Plato's world of forms and the history of representations, a murky zone somewhere between pure abstraction and lived experience. It points to the difficulty of explaining the relationship between a conceptual ideal and a representational ideal, the latter of which, at least, is mediated by cultural and personal experience.

In practice, Clark's loose definition of the ideal as an historical phenomenon enabled him to include within his argument a formal analysis of different representational ideals for the body that were produced throughout history. He blended Ancient Greek notions of bodily perfection and the Christian association of the body with original sin, thus constructing the ideal nude as a trans-historical category that subsumes conflicting representational schemes and antithetical belief systems under its mantle. Contemporary historiographers, particularly those influenced by Foucault, have criticised this sort of totalising approach, drawing attention to the complexity and contingency of historical systems and events. Their denunciation of all trans-historical categories, plus the criticism that Clark's category of the ideal nude, in particular, emerges from distinctions based on race, class and gender have virtually terminated all speculation on the ideal as a means of conceptualising positive representations of the body.

Addressing concerns that are related to Clark's enterprise, Nicholas Mirzoeff's book for example, entitled *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (1995), invoked Foucault's variant of 'effective history' and its relationship to the body to explain how various forms of 'the ideal figure', historically, were constructed in art. According to Foucault,

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the processes of history's destruction of the body.

(Foucault 1984: 83)

By renouncing ideals, linear chronologies and progressive histories and focusing instead on 'ruptures', 'discontinuities' and material effects, Foucault analysed the way the body is worked on by the processes of history, is arbitrarily constructed by them and at the same time legitimates their hegemony. Mirzoeff's analysis of art, however, is not as radically anti-essentialist as his reference to Foucault might suggest. Describing *Bodyscape* as a contribution to 'the genealogy of the (post)-modern body image from the Enlightenment to the present', Mirzoeff conducted his analysis primarily within the articulation of art and history, and only secondarily within the articulation of the body and history. Although the 'bodyscape', as he defined it, is a cluster of signs that is multiple rather than singular and flexible rather than fixed, it is meta-physical in that it is distinct from the physical body of 'flesh and blood' and trans-historical in that it is a category that spans the passing of time. Mirzoeff implied moreover that the artist appeals to concepts or ideals which, by means of context and style, 'limit' or 'frame' the 'bodyscape' (Mirzoeff 1995: 3). By addressing the 'bodyscape', however, Mirzoeff could describe the continuing

recurrence of constructs of the 'perfect figure' in Western culture, at the level of representations, rather than ideals.

In identifying a *feminist* ideal for the representation of the female body, my book foregrounds the concepts which 'limit' and 'frame' the 'bodyscape', but acknowledges the lessons to be learnt from Clark's confusion between a conceptual ideal and a representational ideal. My interest in the ideal runs against the grain of much feminist thinking, since deconstruction does not tolerate ideals. For example, Parker and Pollock argued that in being denied access to the nude, historically, women were 'excluded from both the tools and the power to give meanings of their own to themselves and their culture' (Parker and Pollock 1981: 115). Rather than challenge women to construct the female body according to a feminist ideal, however, Parker and Pollock advocated deconstruction of the 'patriarchal' ideal and representation. I will demonstrate that even feminist art that deconstructed painting, representation and the patriarchal ideal was often also directed towards the conceptual ideal of an erotically appealing female body that was inclusive of difference.

Analysis of Clark's example shows also that, in considering a feminist ideal, it is necessary to take account of how the ideal was mediated by the changing historical, social and signifying relations in which it was implicated. One would have to allow, for example, that Barbara Kruger's resistant body, Karen Finley's transgressive body and Cindy Sherman's simulacral body engaged in different ways with changing attitudes to gender and visual culture, and that to a certain extent they contributed to those changes. It might be argued that the changes, in turn, inflected notions of inclusiveness and eroticism, thus rendering the ideal unstable and eventually groundless. When taken to this extreme, however, such arguments are ultimately counterproductive, and do not reflect the way most visual artists proceeded in their artistic practices. Although one should admit a danger of both distortion and the prioritisation of mind over body in diachronic analyses of body ideals, artists have had to negotiate these difficulties in order to consider the possibility or impossibility of positive representations of the female body. In practice, these negotiations entailed a combination of conceptual and/or bodily manoeuvres as part of the processes of art production.

Since the feminist ideal discussed in this book encompassed only about thirty years of recent history, efforts to define it cannot be either exhaustive or conclusive. Rather than conduct a chronological survey of feminist art production, or to invent my own definition of feminism, I propose to use artworks, in subsequent chapters, as the basis for my analysis. I suggest that a feminist ideal can be traced by focusing on ambiguity in art and by following themes from visual cues. Meanwhile, in order to provide a background to theories and artworks discussed in future chapters, I want to outline how ambiguity has been explained in contemporary theory – especially in relation to sexuality and representation – and how it complicated feminist politics. Most of the theories are by now well known to artists and have informed contemporary art practices in diverse and indirect ways.

Ambiguity

In the visual arts, ambiguity is an effect of representational processes, a complication, a blurring, an uncertainty or vagueness. It may be consciously intended, or it may occur as an accident or mistake. As the latter, it marks the failure of intentions, competencies, perceptions, and the way vision is implicated in all of these. On the other hand, ambiguity may be neither intentional nor a mistake. Depending on your critical perspective, ambiguity can occur in the mind or body of the artist, or in the way the artist is positioned as a 'subject' in discourse. It can be found in the artwork or in the spectator, in public or in private space, or in the relationship between the art and its historical context. If art is to be seen as an extension to the body, and as a point of mediation between the artist's body and that of the spectator, ambiguity is an effect of its being both an object for erotic display and an object of erotic, visual pleasure. As such, ambiguity is of primary interest in a feminist analysis of the female body in visual representation.

Ambiguity in visual art is an effect of the incommensurability of vision and language, as I will demonstrate in [Chapter 4](#). Usually, however, it is a term that is associated with the imprecision or artifice of language. Perhaps the most notable writer in English on ambiguity was the modernist literary critic, William Empson, who in his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1995 [1930]) set out to demonstrate the importance of ambiguity to the beauty and complexity of poetry. He defined ambiguity as 'any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language' (1995: 19). Beginning with the simplest type of ambiguity, where 'a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once', he proceeded to consider its many different aspects, describing more complex forms, with illustrations from a range of canonical texts (1995: 20–21). In these definitions, ambiguity is both a space where different meanings blur, overlap, or are conflated, and a method for achieving these effects. As such it is open, dynamic and multi-layered. However, Empson's definition of ambiguity implies that it is also somehow integrated, whole and contained by 'forces' (1995: 272). As he explained, 'A sort of unity may be given by the knowledge of a scheme on which all the things occur; so that the scheme itself becomes the one thing which is being considered' (1995: 271). To be unitary, he suggested, ambiguity must have a basis in rationality, since 'anything (phrase, sentence, or poem) meant to be considered as a unit must be unitary, must stand for a single order of the mind' (1995: 271). Finally Empson claimed that even though ambiguity is inextricable from its context, 'it is a thing which the more interesting and valuable situations are more likely to justify' (1995: 272). He thus explained ambiguity in positive terms as a measure of artistic value.

If modernist or structuralist criticism constructed ambiguity as a unity, post-structuralist criticism approached it as disunity. It did not conceptualise ambiguity as a category or set of categories for analysis, but as fields of dispersion and moments of discontinuity that threaten to dissolve not only the 'forces' that