

# ***Feminism & Contemporary Art***

**The Revolutionary Power  
of Women's Laughter**

***Jo Anna Isaak***

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# FEMINISM AND CONTEMPORARY ART

The impact of women artists on the contemporary art movement has resulted in a powerful and innovative feminist reworking of traditional approaches to the theory and history of art. *Feminism and Contemporary Art* discusses the work of individual women artists within the context of the wider social, physical and political world.

Jo Anna Isaak looks at the work of a diverse range of artists from the United States, the former Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and Canada. She discusses the work of such artists as Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Nancy Spero, Elaine Reichek, Jeanne Silverthorne, Mary Kelly, Lorna Simpson, Hannah Wilke, Jenny Holzer, Kiki Smith and the Guerrilla Girls. In an original case study of art production in a non-capitalist context, Isaak examines a range of work by twentieth-century Soviet women artists.

Refuting the notion that there is a specifically female way of creating art, and dubious of any generalizing notion of “feminist art practices”, Isaak nevertheless argues that contemporary art under the influence of feminism is providing the momentum for a comic critique of key assumptions about art, art history, and the role of the artist.

Richly illustrated with over one hundred photographs, paintings and images by women artists, this work provides a provocative and valuable account of the diversity and revolutionary potential of women’s art practice

**Jo Anna Isaak** is a writer living in New York City. She is the author of *The Ruin of Representation in Modernist Art and Texts* (1986) and the curator of the exhibition *Laughter Ten Years After*.

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# FEMINISM AND CONTEMPORARY ART

THE REVOLUTIONARY POWER OF  
WOMEN'S LAUGHTER

*Jo Anna Isaak*



London and New York

First published 1996  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002.

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-203-41038-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-71862-3 (Adobe eReader Format)  
ISBN 0-415-08014-2 (hbk)  
ISBN 0-415-08015-0 (pbk)

# DEDICATION

My study window overlooks the St Stephen's School Playground.

The school is a private Catholic school for children from kindergarten through grade school. It has separate entrances for girls and boys and the children daily line up outside the doors marked "Boys" or "Girls".

One day I overheard a little boy tell a little girl she couldn't play on the swing because it was on "the boys' side." Clearly, there was something in the gender divide the school was underlining that the little boy understood as privileging his sex. The little girl turned to him and said,

"This is the *playground*. There's no boys' side on the *playground*."

It is to that five-year-old future feminist, who has such an unshakeable grasp of the fact that the playground is hers to enjoy, that I dedicate this book.



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been on my mind for many years. Long before I organized “The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter” exhibition, I had explored the connections between women and laughter in the writings of Gertrude Stein. Stein’s mode of writing—transgressive, excessive, and fearlessly humorous—provided a model for looking at current developments in women’s art practice. While there was never enough time to write a book during the summer, there was time to write shorter essays on individual artists. These I wrote with the theme of laughter in mind, knowing that at a later date I would integrate these essays into the book. Earlier versions or portions of individual chapters appeared in *Art Journal* (Summer 1994); *Meaning: Contemporary Art Issues* (May 1993); *Heresies* 26, 1993; *Parkett* (December 1992); *American Imago* (Fall 1991); and *Nancy Spero: Work Since 1950*, 1987. The book may have been on my mind, but it was not really conceived until the spring of 1991 when Lisa Tickner arrived at the college where I teach in upstate New York and managed to pull me out of the deep bureaucratic morass I was in as chair of my department. She looked over the proposal for the book, told me to make a few changes, mail it, and as she put it, “Bob’s your uncle!” This was the first of many important contributions friends were to make to the book.

This is a book of friends. Writing is an isolated activity, but throughout the time it took me to bring this manuscript to completion, I always felt I was working as part of a collective. I am grateful to all the artists who contributed to the book. Our ongoing conversations about art and the friendships formed while working on this project have become part of the fabric of my life. I am particularly grateful to Susan Unterberg who traveled with me on my last trip to Russia to take photographs of artists’ work. I would like to thank the Guerrilla Girls for the cover of the book and Kathy Grove for her work on many of the photographs in the book. Lisa Tickner, Jon Bird, and Avis Lang read the manuscript and made many helpful suggestions. Margaret McKay also read the manuscript and prepared the index, just as she did for my first book and for my PhD

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

thesis. My niece, Joelle Sowden, helped gather together the illustrations. Finally, I would like to thank Dan O'Connell mainly because he is pretty funny, for a guy.

# INTRODUCTION

Writing in 1974, Lise Vogel posed a series of demanding questions:

In the past decade the women's liberation movement has explored issues touching on virtually all areas of human experience. Why then do we hear so little about art? Why has art, perhaps more than any other field, lagged so far behind the general movement for change initiated by modern feminism? Specifically: Where are the books, articles, or collections of essays presenting a feminist critique of art? Why are there no monographs and virtually no articles on women artists written from a feminist perspective? Where are the reproductions and slides of the work of women artists? Why can't one find syllabi and bibliographies covering issues of women, art, and feminism? What is the meaning of the almost complete lack of feminist studio and art history courses in the schools? Why are there so few feminist art history courses in the schools? Why are there so few feminist art historians and critics? What are women artists today doing? And what are those women who consider themselves feminists doing and why? What should a feminist artist, critic, or art historian do? What is a feminist point of view in the visual arts?

(1974:3)

Around the same time Nicos Hadjinicolaou in *Art History and Class Struggle* was criticizing art history for being "one of the last outposts of reactionary thought" (1973:4). Vogel's questions and Hadjinicolaou's condemnation are related, but it wasn't until five years after the first publication of his book that he discovered, to his chagrin, that he was contributing to this reactionary thinking. A reader pointed out to him that throughout his own book art historians are assumed to be exclusively male and that it perpetuated the customary linguistic subordination of every grammatical person into the inclusive, but repressive person of a universal "he." Hadjinicolaou concluded that "this proves to what extent even so-called progressive people are victims of some very old and reactionary attitudes" (1973; 1978 edn: 2). What was left out of Hadjinicolaou's account of art history was far more systemic than what could be remedied



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simply by changing the personal pronoun to “she.” However, the fact that his omissions were presented to him *as a problem* is a direct result of the feminist questioning of the discourse of art history, which has caused the discipline to become self-conscious. Questions asked of a subject have a way of determining the answers given. Today it is understood that any activity which addresses the logic of production (and this includes cultural production) but which neither attempts an analysis of the construction of sexual difference nor posits an alternative economy of the sexes is either naive or obtuse to the point of complicity.

Writing at the end of the 1980s, Arthur Danto surveyed the mainstream of contemporary art and acknowledged, somewhat to his surprise, that were he “to select the most innovative artists of this particular period... most of them would probably be women” (1989:794). This realization caused him, in turn, to ask “whether this particular period, and hence this particular mainstream, was made to order for women, even if the work in question might not have any especially feminine—or feminist—content?” To ask if the mainstream was “made to order for women,” as if this occurred by some happy accident, is to fail to realize that the very nature of contemporary art has been changed *because* of the power of the persistent critique that women have brought to bear on key assumptions about art, art history, and the role of the artist.<sup>1</sup> The convergence of the feminist critique, postmodernism’s decentering of the subject, and theoretical reflections on gender, sexuality, politics, and representation provided the momentum for a number of feminist artists who are, indeed, the most innovative artists working today.

In 1982, more or less midway between Vogel’s questions and Danto’s reassessment, I organized an exhibition entitled “The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter.” The exhibition was an early attempt to locate art within the arena of contemporary theoretical discussions. The fundamental discoveries of modern linguistics and psychoanalysis had radically affected the understanding of how all signifying systems operate. There was a growing awareness that a lot was at stake for women in these new assessments of how meaning is produced and organized in all areas of cultural practice. In 1968, when Roland Barthes pronounced the author “dead,” most of the old verities associated with the confident bourgeois belief in individualism and absolute property rights died with him. For those at risk of losing their privileges, postmodernism is experienced as a crisis, but the death of the author and the consequent failure of fantasies about authoritative selfhood have wholly different implications for those who never held this privileged position. It leveled the playing field for women—and play in the new authority-free zone they did. They began by dismantling “the prison house of language” through play, or laughter, or to use the term the French have recently reintroduced to English, *jouissance*: enjoyment, pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure or pleasure derived from

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the body. Included in this notion of *jouissance* is a sense of play as linguistic excess, the joy of disrupting or going beyond established, or fixed meaning into the realm of non-sense. Since, as Barthes succinctly put it, “a code cannot be destroyed, only played off,” play may well be the most revolutionary strategy available.

The theme of laughter and the carnivalesque that runs throughout the present book grew out of the exhibition and is a continuation of that early project. In these chapters are references to Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, in which he develops from Rabelais’s writing a theory of laughter and the carnivalesque as potential revolutionary strategies; to Barthes’s and Kristeva’s notion of laughter as libidinal license, the *jouissance* of the polymorphic, orgasmic body; to Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, in which an analysis of the liberating potential of laughter emerges from the workings of a witticism or a play upon language; and to Freud’s essays on narcissism, which I examine in order to show why those in possession of the most radical humor may be women. I use analytic strategies developed in Althusserian Marxism, the construction of the subject formulated by Jacques Lacan, the discourses and institutions of power analyzed by Michel Foucault, and Brecht’s strategies for an engaged artistic practice, and of course I draw upon the wealth of material that is currently being developed in feminist critical theory within the visual arts. To Lisa Tickner’s list of the two issues central to the women’s movement since the 1960s—finding a voice for women that is intelligible and separate from the patriarchal voice, and reclaiming the image of women from the representations of others—I add a third—analyzing and utilizing that particularly dense transfer point of power relations: pleasure.

To gather a group of women artists together under any rubric is to be forced into an essentialist position. Anthologies or group shows of exclusively male artists, by contrast, are allowed to address whatever organizing principle the curator or writer has in mind: a geographical location the artists may have in common, a period of time in which they worked, a particular style or medium. For example, the “New Photography 9” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was ostensibly about new photography in general, not just from the perspective of a particular gender or race, even though every artist included was white and male. Women artists, writers, and curators have never been able to masquerade in the Emperor’s clothes of universal humanity. Even if only two women artists are written about or exhibited together, the issue of gender inevitably arises. But to argue, as I intend to do in the following chapters, that women are in possession of something that men may lack is to engage in a strategic, rather than a predetermined, essentialism, to push the issue of gender past the point where it can be used to ghettoize women.

At the same time, I hope to raise doubts about any global notion of a feminist art practice. I intend to move the debate from a biological

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determinism to a consideration of gender positions occupied in the field of signs. A feminist art practice, as invoked throughout this book, is not a term designating a homogeneous group (i.e. the disenfranchised) or a fixed site (the margin) but rather an agency of intervention—an ongoing activity of pluralizing, destabilizing, baffling any centered discourse. This work, like all feminist activity, is a calculated optimistic gesture, and thus I may be accused of utopianism, or at least participation in what Steven Connor has referred to as “the romance of the margins,” that is, a belief in the subversive potential of the marginal condition (1989:228). Women are the least likely to regard their marginal condition as “romance.” The romantic notion of the “outsider” artist working alone in his (*sic*) studio has continued as a convenient myth for male artists, who from time to time may affect the role, but for women artists working in isolation this myth is more likely to be a bleak reality. In the streets of New York City the Guerrilla Girls have rewritten this particular romance in a poster called “The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist.” Some of these advantages include “Working without the pressure of success. Not having to be in shows with men. Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs. Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine. Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius. Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position. Knowing your career might pick up after you are eighty.” If women artists have been working at the margins, it is because that has been the only site available to them. But in the 1980s something quite remarkable happened: using the subversive strategy of laughter, women artists began turning the culturally marginal position to which they had always been relegated into the new frontier.

I am not attempting to write an account of The Most Important contemporary women artists. The artists discussed in the following chapters may or may not be part of what has been mythologized as the mainstream. I am not interested in valorizing a mainstream nor in exploring, validating, or reinforcing hegemony. According to Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*, hegemony is a process that relies upon the mechanisms of tradition and the canons of Old Masters in order to waylay the utopian desires that are potentially embodied in cultural production (1977:115–117). *The waylaid utopian desires are what I intend to explore.* What is most encouraging about the recent influx of women into the mainstream is the changes they have made in art production itself and how successful they have been in addressing a far larger audience than that which frequents galleries and museums. At a time when the art world has generally shunned political content, these artists have been producing “laboratory work” for those seeking to examine social realities and cultural myths. If they have established reputations in the mainstream, they have done so by undermining the very characteristics upon which it is established. They

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have even managed to undermine what Lucy Lippard calls “the most effective bludgeon on the side of homogeneity...the notion of Quality” (1990:7). Their success is important for the way it has changed contemporary thinking about value systems that extend far beyond the art world. The constituents of “genius,” “originality,” “quality” are not transcendent criteria identifiable only by those in power. They are temporary, subjective, susceptible to change, and change is what this study is dedicated to.

Laughter, as it is used throughout this study, is meant to be thought of as a metaphor for transformation, for thinking about cultural change. In providing libidinal gratification, laughter can also provide an analytic for understanding the relationships between the social and the symbolic while allowing us to imagine these relationships differently. In asking for the response of laughter, the artists discussed in this book are engaging in a difficult operation. The viewer must want, at least briefly, to emancipate himself from “normal” representation; in order to laugh, he must recognize that he shares the same repressions. What is requested is not a private depoliticized *jouissance* but sensuous solidarity. Laughter is first and foremost a communal response.

While the focus is limited to women, it should be clear that the feminist “we” addressed by laughter is not gender-exclusive. It is not only women who are negatively inscribed by the symbolic function. As William Carlos Williams says of Gertrude Stein, an artist whose laughter is in many ways a precursor to the works presented in this study: “The tremendous cultural revolution implied by this interior revolution of technique tickles the very heart and liver of a man, makes him feel good. Good, that is, if he isn’t too damned tied to his favorite stupidities. That’s why he laughs. His laugh is the first acknowledgement of liberation” (1954:163).

The first chapter, “The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter,” sets out the theories of laughter that will be used throughout this book. Contrary to Dan Cameron’s assertion that “post-feminism hearkens back to Lacan, who joined with Freud in proclaiming the revolutionary power of woman’s laughter” (1987:80) neither Freud nor Lacan said anything of the sort. I said it, but not in reference to something called “postfeminism.” Nevertheless, the mistake is an interesting one. Like asking if the mainstream was made to order for women, it suggests that these philosophers paved the way for women, that the historical struggles over women’s position within the institution of psychoanalysis either never took place or were inherently unnecessary. Whatever enabling theories women may be able to obtain from Freud or Lacan, they have had to wrest them from the writings themselves. Often they have done this not so much in an attempt to seize power from a phallogocentric theory, but as a defence or rereading of psychoanalytic theory by those aware of its importance to the understanding of women’s relation to, and constitution by, any discourse. It

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was just such a defence that the poet H.D. tells us Freud once demanded she *not* engage in on his behalf, or on behalf of his work; he feared that it would proceed like the “inevitable course of a disease once a virus has entered the system” (1974:86). This is exactly the kind of “defence” I plan to engage in. I intend to show that embedded in both Freud’s writings and in the writings of Rabelais are the germs of a theory of laughter that will clarify why women are particularly well positioned to employ laughter as a revolutionary strategy. And since laughter, as Freud has pointed out, “is among the highly infectious expressions of psychical states” (1905b:156), my defence of these phallogentric discourses may act as a virus once it has entered the system.

The title of the second chapter, “Art History and Its (Dis)Contents,” alludes to Freud’s “Civilization and Its Discontents” (1930) and to Jacqueline Rose’s essay “Femininity and its Discontents” and is intended to suggest that neither femininity nor art history exists as a given; both are produced, and each may in fact be productive of the other. Lacan’s famous formulation—that the woman does not exist, that femininity, psychoanalytically speaking, is constructed in relation to a series of representations—put an end to the attempts to locate an essential femininity which preoccupied a number of feminist artists working in the 1970s. It has provided the theoretical basis for most of the feminist research on representation that has been undertaken within the last decade, informing a whole strand of artistic production. Here, in the field of representation which Mary Jacobus refers to as “the traditional arena of woman’s oppression” (1986:108), the demythologizing criticism of postmodernism has formed an oppositional politic around the issues of originality, authority, production, reproduction, meaning, mastery, the commodity, commodity fetishism, and the fetish. The feminist intervention in art history entails looking not just at the contents of that discourse, the purported premises of that history, but also at what it pretends *not* to be about, particularly the myth of its economic, political, and sexual innocence.

Chapter 3 addresses art production in what is now the former Soviet Union. This, after all, is the culture that produced Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, which argues that laughter and the carnivalesque are potent catalysts for popular revolutions. In an effort to analyze the artistic production of women working within a capitalist consumer culture, I expanded the scope of this study to include an investigation of those working outside that system. I found that in spite of the deep seriousness of the Slavic temperament and the hardships of living in a repressive regime, Russians have a highly developed *smechovja kulture* (“laugh culture”). Part deconstructionists, part appropriationalists, part comedians, post-Soviet artists have become the leaders of a “ludic” postmodernism that for some time now has been mining and undermining the cultural determinism of Soviet ideology, and will very likely enable them to

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negotiate capitalist ideology better than we are able to. That this study was undertaken at a historical moment when these differences are about to disappear makes the exchange of information amongst women artists East and West all the more urgent. We in the West need to be aware of the work of women who are not caught in the machinations of commodity capitalism, and they, in turn, need to know of our strategies of subversion before these differences are covered over in the seamless blanket of homogeneity that is the hallmark of what, ironically, is known as bourgeois individualism. My analysis, both of the historic period of the avantgarde and of contemporary Russian artists, focuses on the way these artists, working in such different economic, political, and ideological circumstances, can illuminate contemporary art practices in the West. The issues I address when discussing Russian women artists are not the same as those that would be addressed by someone writing from within that culture. Part of the great delight of researching this chapter was the opportunity it gave me to get to know a number of Russian women, the most hospitable and generous people I have met. Still, I will always remain outside the culture in which they work and live, and my misperceptions will be readily apparent to them. By the same token, they have often seemed to me to be riddled with misperceptions about the conditions in which Western women live and work. In the course of many long, intense conversations that lasted well into the night, I have come to realize that our mutual misperceptions may prove to be the most fruitful part of the interchange, for they tell a good deal about ourselves and what we are hoping to find in new social configurations for women.

Chapter 4, "Mothers of Invention," developed from an exhibition I organized on the occasion of my mother's death. I found myself drawn to those artists who, while realizing the enormous difficulty of this project, turned to their own mothers or the figure of the mother in Western culture in their search for ways to represent another form of love, "*la mère qui jouit*." In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf said that "a woman writing thinks back through her mothers" (1929:96). In this sense, it may be that this whole book was written with my mother, with our mothers, in mind.

Chapter 5, "Mapping the Imaginary," traces the way in which various systems of representation and codification developed during the Renaissance were used by European nations in their colonizing ventures and began influencing psychological perception. J-M. Charcot, Freud's mentor and the discoverer of hysteria, used a number of perceptual conventions developed in the visual arts in order to map an invisible disease onto the bodies of the female inmates of the Salpêtrière asylum. In the process he was able to draw upon the psychological associations surrounding these visual codes, particularly the proprietary assumptions inherent in representation itself.

The final chapter, "Encore," exhibits an obsessional symptom: it is a repeat, a return to the origins of psychoanalysis and hysteria. Repetition

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may be the only way in which the history of psychoanalysis can be told—as indicated by its etymology (to analyze: to undo by going back)—as progress in regression. The question of woman addressed in Freud's early lectures and essays on hysteria is not the same as "the woman question" current at the time in which women's right *to* representation was at issue; instead the issue is the representation *of* woman. This chiasmus is more than rhetorical; the eliding of the historical and social content of this narrative is exactly what I wish to examine: just why it was that in the essays on hysteria, the canonical texts of psychoanalysis, written during a period of growing activity on the part of the women's suffrage movement, the possibility that hysteria may have social or political origins did not enter into the analytic reading. In *Studies on Hysteria* Freud does suggest that some of the symptomatic aspects of hysteria—"the pantomimic representation of phantasy" and the "clownism" documented by Charcot, for example—may be the return of repressed pleasurable features of the European carnival. The second half of this chapter looks at the work of a number of contemporary artists who in various ways enlist the hysteric's gesture of resistance and reenact ritual fragments of that festive tradition.

The end of the chapter and of the book takes us to the endgame, to dissolution, to death. If, as Hélène Cixous suggests, death and the feminine sex are for men unrepresentable, then figuring these two negatives together may be a way of asserting a positive. It may be that the most radically discursive understanding of the body, the body as site of political agency, is the body in dis-integration. This is not an apocalyptic vision; our sense of integrity is, at best, tenuous and mutable. Donna Haraway argues that "integrity" cannot reside within the "natural" body, since bodies "are not born; they are made" (1991:208). Our understanding of ourselves as political agents should not focus on the self preserving its integrity, but should rather acknowledge the fact that integrity is a highly contingent and artificial construct—that the self is not a permanent given, but is always blurring into obscurity. In exploring the reconfigurations of their own bodies' aging, disease, or dying, these artists may be the first to understand the body's potential for embodied agency. Through this work, through the courage of their exploration, they continue to live as "activists," engaged with a society to which previously they may have been invisible.

While the diversity of artistic practices and cultural concerns addressed in these chapters makes it apparent that I am not attempting to chronicle a particular homogeneous movement in art, I am however chronicling a collective project. In June of 1994, I attended an exhibition and conference in Denmark entitled "Dialogue with the Other." In the spacious halls of the Kunsthallen Brandts Klaedefabrik, Lene Burkard brought together the work of thirty contemporary women artists and ten women writers and philosophers. The art work, made of different media and composed in various countries, and the speakers, from different countries and disciplines,

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addressing disparate concerns, came together in a moment of ideological self-realization to speak surprisingly clearly of our collective agenda. What projects like that exhibition or the work of the artists discussed in this book reveal is the importance of the dialogue we have been having with each other for the past two decades. Even if we have never met, we have become confident of the shared aims of our collective, and we have come to realize how one woman's work or words leads onto or enables the next woman to work or speak. The overarching intention of this book is to participate in and further this ongoing conversation so that the heteroglossae of this revolution are not just heard, but "resound."





# 1

## THE REVOLUTIONARY POWER OF WOMEN'S LAUGHTER

In the beginning was the gest he *f* jousstly says, for the end is with woman, flesh-without-word, while the man to be is in a worse case after than before since sheon the supine satisfies the verb to him! Toughough, Tootoological. Thou the first person shingeller. Art, an imperfect subjunctive.

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

The history of Western art begins with images of laughter—the laughter of women. In *Lives of the Artists*, the founding text for the discipline of art history, Giorgio Vasari tells us that the young Leonardo da Vinci began his artistic career by portraying laughing women. These heads of laughing women, “*teste di femmine, che ridono*,” first fashioned in clay and then cast in plaster, were “as beautiful as if they had been modelled by the hand of a master” (quoted in Freud 1910:111). The laughing heads have been lost from the canon of Leonardo’s art, but when Freud turns art historian in his analysis of the childhood of Leonardo, he returns to Vasari’s account of these images of laughing women: “The passage, since it is not intended to prove anything, is quite beyond suspicion,” Freud assures us, thereby arousing our suspicions (ibid.).

Something is at stake here: Freud suspects some obsessional behavior in the way Leonardo returns to images of laughing women in subsequent portraits. He examines the account of the lost fragments for a clue to the most famous enigma in the history of art—the unsolved riddle of the expression on the Mona Lisa’s face. Haunted by the smile himself, Freud discovers that it has become an obsessional topic amongst art historians. He presents the early commentary on this painting as one might set out pieces of evidence in an unsolved mystery. Freud finds, as he sifts through various biographers of Leonardo, that they too have become obsessed with the enigmatic smile: “Walter Pater, who sees in the picture of Mona Lisa a ‘presence...expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men have come to desire’...writes very sensitively of ‘the unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it, which plays over all Leonardo’s

work'" (ibid.: 110). The idea that two contrary elements are combined in the Mona Lisa's expression recurs in several commentaries: For Angelo Conti the smile is more than a smile; it is a laugh, and what that laugh expresses is something quintessentially female, both seductive and threatening: "The lady smiled in regal calm: her instincts of conquest, of ferocity, all the heredity of the species, the will to seduce and ensnare, the charm of deceit, the kindness that conceals a cruel purpose,—all this appeared and disappeared by turns behind the laughing veil and buried itself in the poem of her smile...Good and wicked, cruel and compassionate, graceful and feline, she laughed" (quoted in ibid. 1910:109).

After citing many passages of this sort, none providing a satisfactory answer to the enigma, Freud announces that he is giving up on his investigations: "Let us leave unsolved the riddle of the expression on Mona Lisa's face, and note the indisputable fact that her smile exercised no less powerful a fascination on the artist than on all who have looked at it for the last four hundred years" (ibid.: 109). But this is a ruse, for it is exactly at this moment that Freud links the smile of the Mona Lisa to the laughing terracotta juvenilia and then to Leonardo's mother: "It may very well have been that Leonardo was fascinated by Mona Lisa's smile for the reason that it awoke something in him which had for long lain dormant in his mind—probably an old memory" (ibid.: 110). Freud goes on to assert that "the smiling women are nothing other than repetitions of his mother Caterina, and we begin to suspect the possibility that it was his mother who possessed the mysterious smile—the smile that he had lost and that fascinated him so much when he found it again in the Florentine lady" (ibid.: 111).

As with the lost laughing heads, there is very little information about Caterina, whom Freud describes as "probably a peasant girl" who had her illegitimate child "torn" from her when she was very young. Her name does not appear in Leonardo's journals except in connection with a meticulous accounting of her funeral expenses. The one thing Freud feels certain he knows about her is that she is remembered by her son as laughing. "This memory was of sufficient importance for him never to get free of it when it had once been aroused; he was continually forced to give it new expression" (ibid.: 110). Freud is one of many scholars who think Leonardo strove to portray this expression in all of his works. Something about these laughing women and their enigmatic expressions has long been disquieting the discourse of art history.

Acknowledging that biographers are frequently drawn to their subjects because they feel they have characteristics in common with their "hero," Freud undertakes his own obsessional investigation of what lies behind the "laughing veil." In his essay "On Narcissism," written four years after the essay on Leonardo, Freud makes an odd series of connections. He links women and humorists in a rather bizarre sequence that includes great