Subjects In Pictures

YYZ Toronto

September 24 to October 11

When Lacan began his famous *Encore* lectures, approaching what Freud expressively left aside, “Was will das Weib?”, he complains that “since the time that we’ve been begging women, begging them on bended knee, to tell us something of this other pleasure, well then, not a word.” This silence, is, of course, precisely the point. For within Lacan’s psychoanalytical description of the symbolic order, we are all, men and women, socially constructed through language and representation as divided (sexed) subjects that privilege the phallus. This ‘other’ pleasure, feminine jouissance, in excess and unmediated by the phallus, threatens the inscription of sexual identity which upholds this order. Hence, it is unrepresentable, unspeakable in a masculine economy of desire. For to suggest that there is something more, beyond the phallus, is to disrupt the signification of woman as lack, is to steer dangerously close to the Oedipal site where man veils the fear of castration through designating the woman as the sight the phallus’s absence. Man would no longer be whole, filling the hole, unifying the (other) half of their divided subjecthood. But for the master, the analyst, Lacan, he only wants this which he cannot have: to unveil the Oedipal scene, to be with the women but still a man, to “take that stroll as the cock of the walk,” as Jane Gallop so aptly puts it. Stephen Heath, on the other hand, knows he cannot be with the women, and in *Difference*, his British reply to Lacan’s *Encore*, he wishes to protect us, the women, against Lacan’s seduction. He cannot be among us, so he positions himself aside us, devoted, concerned, chivalrous in his call for feminists to engage in “alternative practices in so far as they transform the relations of the symbolic in representation against representation”.

In Toronto, there is a third voice, another man, who would speak of difference and divided subjects and the look and the other. And how then, are we, as women, to situate Philip Monk, this Toronto critic who has appropriated the discourse of these other men, who would speak about women and their representation? Is it only their words, or their strategies, which Monk has adopted in his desire to curate a ‘women’s’ show: rehearsing his justifications in “Axes of Difference” (*Vanguard*, May, 1994), and refining his own encore in the catalogue accompanying *Subjects in Pictures*, the YYZ show?

Any attempt to delineate this answer, to specify the site of Monk’s criticism seems to lead us into a labyrinth of seduction, controversy, and desire. It is the labyrinth of the “dark continent”, of indefinable terms and writing from a feminine position of ‘not all’, not whole. It is a labyrinth one enters by acceding the fiction of the unified subject as a veil for a divided, unstable sexuality, and by according language and representation the non-neutral power of collectively signifying a phallocentric order. Certainly. Monk attributes to the artists he discusses, both men and women, glimmerings of the consequences this disorder has for the status of their own artistic production. Men, he suggests, retreat in face of this legitimizing crisis. With the ‘objective’ unity of their symbolic universe threatened, there is a collective disavowal occuring, a simulacra of mastery, a masquerade of the subject, which leads to “romantic idealism, private subjectivism, ‘sentimental’ humanism or nihilistic expressionism.’ Women, on the other hand, as subjects of representation and subjects involved in representing, can reveal, unveil, the processes of the phallic order, can be “critical in contributing to a non-subjective theory of subjectivity.” Monk then proceeds to attribute to these differences “sets of oppositions,” finding the place for women “to act in the real (through representation changing representation),” and banishing men to the imaginary/fictional order where “it is impossible to act in the real,” and “one is only able to create emblems of that failure.”

Monk, it appears, is championing feminist critiques of representation, cheering on the women artists, assuring us of the success our strategies, privileging us as the site of the real. Why is it then, in the midst of these accolades, that a feeling of disquiet, of discomfort persists? Perhaps it is because it has all been too easy, too pat. Ten years ago it was men, not women, who were able to act, to produce, to represent their desire through vision, through a presence marked by our absence. How is it then, through a few images, through the work of six women artists in Toronto (Shelagh Alexander, Janice Gurney, Nancy Johnson, Sandra Meigs, Joanne Tod, Shirley Wiitasalo) that we have been able to rupture the homogeneous and monolithic structure of the phallocentric order? Have men, really, faced with the fear of the feminine body, with its plurality of orifices and unmediated pleasure, retreated in such a wholesale manner to the private and subjective ruins of masculine representation? The feeling of disquiet grows. Perhaps it is misleading to situate Monk within the labyrinth of sexual difference, or perhaps he is misleading us, with his talk of “the subject, like meaning, is never stable,” and “his/her identity is reinforced through the image.” Both Lacan and Heath, for all their difficulties and contradictions, stake a piece of the turf on the side of the feminine, within the labyrinth of sexually divided subjects, close to, approaching the Oedipal scene of castration. But Monk, like the male artists he chides for their appropriation of a discourse from elsewhere, has too much invested in the form of reception, our reception of his work as non-phallic, neutral, a deveiling of the patriarchal order. If Lacan is a “ladies man” and Heath the devoted brother, then Monk is the con man, selling little old ladies in midwestern towns, representations of life insurance, selling us a phallic mis-representation of our difference.

Jane Gallop suggests in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* that “difference produces great anxiety. Polarization, which is the theatrical representation of difference, binds and tames that anxiety. The classic example is sexual difference which is represented as a polar opposition—active/passive, energy /matter.” Monk’s potentially disruptive discussion of the subject, the other, and the look, is similarly tamed. The specificity of sexual desire and its lack, the site of castration as the veiled sight of phallic absence, is being performed on another stage. In its place, Monk asks, “is it fair to create this opposition (men/women, active/passive, mediation/expression)—or am I generalizing from a few examples?” But surely the issue of opposition, of the reversal of the terms, is not is not that of fairness, but of upholding a system of mastery/mastered, absence/presence, phallus/lack which inscribes women’s oppression in a symbolically divided world that masks the real difference, the irreducible, heterogeneous, sexual difference. Monk’s stake in this issue becomes clear in his exhibition of *Subjects in Pictures*, a phallic encore in which all difference is erased.

On this second stage, one step farther displaced from the threat of castration, there are no men, only women, and the Name of the Father, Monk, who gives us access to the law of the artist. This theatre of galleries, curatorial justifications, and representational displays is the site where “women are the mastering subjects; but as women they are traditionally mastered,” but perhaps tradition is not so easily dislodged. As artists these women may be conscious enough to recognize their subjection in representation, but they do not seem to recognize their subjection to a critical authority who trades and exchanges their merchandise of difference for a name. As curatorial objects, they are not masters of, but subjects to the ‘look’ which Monk fails to delineate as the masculine gaze, commodities which maintain Monk’s status as the post-modernist critic who defines the conditions of “changing representation.” Like Monk, they are neither among the women nor beside them, not pricks, not feminists, but floundering in the masculine territory of the critic’s voice. And as for Monk, the axes he grinds of difference are sharpened in an imaginary site of reception. For no one is listening. Women do not hear him, deep in their labyrinth which Monk dares not, perhaps, cannot enter, and the men refuse to hear him and his denunciation of their failures. In a symbolic order of subjects constructed as sexual identities through language and representation, it seems that Monk is the only one left without a gender.