

# **Finding the *conditio muliebris* in Postmodernism: Mimetic exploration and aesthetic understanding of female nature**

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**Abstract:** The paper addresses the exploration of women's nature, intended as a peculiar *conditio muliebris*, focussing on woman artists that reflected on the female body with Postmodernist artistic means. Starting with an analysis of the theoretical propositions of Art Feminism practitioners such as Lucy Lippard, Valie Export, and Mary Kelly, who highlight the alterity of female nature and, thus, of woman's art, the paper later discusses three art installations addressing bodily explorations by woman artists belonging to different generations: Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79), Mona Hatoum's *Corps étrangers* (1994), and Sondra Perry's *Wet and Wavy Looks—Typhon coming on* (2016). The paper argues that these installations substantiate the mentioned theoretical propositions and form a thread of bodily awareness that allows woman artists and the wider public to ascertain female nature by means of a fully aesthetic mimesis. The relationship between art and nature thus becomes one of mimetic exploration of the female body that leads to the acknowledgment of a gender-specific corporal *feeling*.

Keywords: Art Feminism, woman artist, female body, installation art

# **Finding the *conditio muliebris* in Postmodernism:**

## **Mimetic exploration and aesthetic understanding of female nature**

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### **1. Understanding women's nature**

A long-lasting stigma has haunted woman artists, at least since the inception of Modern Art, which has not yet dissolved completely. I am referring to an attitude clearly grounded in patriarchy that envisions woman artists – and women at large – as being more akin to nature, prone to sensitivity, and easily emotional<sup>1</sup>. As regards the Visual Arts, such a vision can be said to have emerged in connection with the first woman painters affiliated to the Impressionist movement in late nineteenth century Paris, the likes of Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassat, and Helena Schjerfbeck. In the 1890s, at a common yet superficial reading, Impressionism was regarded as a style centred on the easy celebration of sensory experience, which by then seemed a practice most suited to women's nature and temperament<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, this vision was instrumental to the rise of Symbolism as an arcane and masculine art cherishing the intellect and imagination, rather than sensations and superficial appearance, which instead were linked to the physicality and capriciousness of women<sup>3</sup>. Art critic and Symbolist supporter Camille Mauclair denigrated Impressionism, calling it a feminine art, and for that very reason he approved of it as the perfect style for woman painters such as Morisot, whose female charm he praised<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> L.R. Lippard, *Projecting a Feminist Criticism*, in "Art Journal", 35/4, 1976, pp. 337-339.

<sup>2</sup> M. Facos, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Art*, Routledge, New York 2011 (Kindle Edition), p. 325.

<sup>3</sup> T. Garb, *Berthe Morisot and the Feminizing of Impressionism*, in M. Tompkins Lewis (ed.), *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, University of California Press, Berkley 2007, pp. 191-204.

<sup>4</sup> W. Babilas, *La querelle des mauvais maîtres*, in "Romanische Forschungen", 98/1-2, 1986, pp. 120-152.

Side lining – if not, even worse, choking – women’s creativity through gender profiling was not to be confined to the Belle Epoque, but stayed in the art world over the entire twentieth century in the form of cliché thinking and rhetoric weapon for the protection of male superiority in the field<sup>5</sup>. Hence, describing women’s nature as intrinsically delicate, fragile, sensitive, and nervous in temperament helped diminishing woman artists’ contribution to the overall development of the arts, confining them to traditional or lesser practices such as sewing and embroidery<sup>6</sup>. Particularly, women’s closeness to nature was both celebrated as a virtue, leaning on primitive idols of fertility, and stigmatised as a sin, when accused of savage sexualisation, which echoes the critique received by the early flower paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe in the 1920s, which later turned her into an icon of the feminist movements<sup>7</sup>. This kind of denigration based on basic naturalness and sexual reproachment were still at the heart of the critique of Performance Art pioneer Carolee Schneemann, who made this kind of gender specific attacks the very backbone of her *Interior Scroll* piece in 1974, literally extracting the patriarchal insults she had received from her vagina<sup>8</sup>. The sentiment of belonging to a lesser gender peaked in the 1990s, when a number of young woman artists, amongst whom Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin, emerged in the British art scene and insistently demanded to be equally considered by the art establishment for awards, commissions, and exhibitions<sup>9</sup>.

Given the intricate development of the woman artist’s role in Modern and Contemporary Art, this paper analyses one of the biggest issues still confronting woman artists in the art world, which is the relationship between woman and nature or, in other words, the very nature of women. Indeed, the essay addresses the exploration of female nature, intended as a peculiar *conditio muliebris* as seen and understood by woman artists themselves. Taking a ride across three generations of Postmodernists, in the following paragraphs I will focus on

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<sup>5</sup> L. Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971), in Nochlin, L. (ed.), *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, Routledge, New York 1988, pp. 1-43.

<sup>6</sup> R. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984), Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2019.

<sup>7</sup> L.M. Grasso, ‘You Are No Stranger to Me’: *Georgia O’Keeffe’s Fan Mail*, in “Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History”, 5, 2013, pp. 24-40.

<sup>8</sup> H. Foster, Krauss, R., Bois, Y.A., Buchloh, B.H.D., Joselit, D., *Art Since 1900: Modernism Antimodernism Postmodernism*, Thames & Hudson, London 2016, pp. 649-653.

<sup>9</sup> R. Fortnum, *Contemporary British Women Artists: In their own words*, Taurus IB, London 2007.

woman artists that reflected on the female body and its sensations with artistic means. To start with a theoretical take on the subject matter, this essay offers an in-depth analysis of the morphological declarations and theoretical propositions of Lucy Lippard, VELIE EXPORT, and Mary Kelly, dating to the 1970s and early 1980s, at the end of the first wave of Art Feminism. As theoreticians and active practitioners in the field, their reflections are of particular interest, because they highlight the alterity of female nature and, thus, of woman's art, advocating for an aesthetic shift in the way the female experience and body are conceptualised and represented<sup>10</sup>.

Consequently, the paper discusses three examples belonging to different decades, conveniently offering a small diachronic survey. Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–1979) leads the reflection as notes on motherly physical sensations, followed by Mona Hatoum's *Corps étranger* (1994) seen as an endoscopic bodily exploration, to conclude with Sondra Perry's *Wet and Wavy Looks – Typhon coming on* (2016) intended as corporal hybris inflicted on the audience. Particular attention will be paid to sensations such as control, uneasiness, trauma, and pain, which lead to the acknowledgment of a gender-specific corporal *feeling* – inner bodily sensations – rather than of stereotyped feminine *feelings* – externally perceived emotional state – superimposed by the male gaze. Hence, this theoretical overview and the mentioned installations will shed light on the artistic strategies adopted to raise bodily awareness and render corporal feeling, thus representing female nature by means of a fully aesthetic – so to speak, sensible – mimesis and redefining the peculiar *conditio muliebris* as an autonomous morphology of women that should rightly attempt to break, change, or expand the canon in art history<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. The female field of art

Moving against the male gaze for Art Feminism in the 1970s was much more than simply claiming equal rights and integration for woman artists in the art world or in art history. For sure, as convincingly pointed out by Linda Nochlin, there *are* social, economic, and

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<sup>10</sup> L. Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> G. De Marco, *Sull'insegnamento universitario di storia dell'arte contemporanea e le scritture al femminile. Riflessioni sul metodo, il canone e i manuali di storia dell'arte. Spunti per un avvio di riflessione*, in "I problemi della pedagogia", LXV/1, 2019, pp. 75-102.

historical barriers that prevented women to become artists in the first place or, in case they succeeded to pursue such a career, to be acknowledged among leading figures of the fine arts until very recently<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, there *is* an alternative history of women's art that can be written, as attempted by Roszika Parker, which consists of so-called minor practices or crafts such as embroidery, sewing, and pottery<sup>13</sup>. However, when reading through some of the theoretical reflections of art feminists of this period – be they of woman artists, critics, or curators – the attention is rather set on first reclaiming women's power of self-definition, both regarding woman's nature and the female image. To fight effectively against the societal impediments to the flourishing of woman artists it seems that Art Feminism seized the redefinition of art *tout court* and, even more, of the nature of women, as well as of the way it is represented<sup>14</sup>. The problem is one of morphological comprehension of the female subject, as well as of art's mimetic attunement to women's nature, that can be summarised – so to speak – in the search for a peculiar *conditio muliebris*. If such a thing as a *conditio muliebris* exists – and it does, according to the extracts from art feminist writings presented in this paragraph – then woman artists' task is to explore what mimetic change is needed to comprehend and acknowledge woman's nature, which necessarily starts from the corporal dimension to reach the sentimental and intellectual life of women<sup>15</sup>.

After actively taking part to the birth of the art feminist movement in North America, supporting the work and ascent of artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, curator and theorist Lucy Lippard tried to pin down the progresses and peculiar character of women artists of her generation<sup>16</sup>. In her 1980 reflections on *The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s* she puts the spotlight precisely on the different «way of life» that women lead and, thus, brought into the art field with the willingness to «change the character of

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<sup>12</sup> L. Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> R. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.A. Bois, B.H.D. Buchloh, , D. Joselit, *Art Since 1900: Modernism Antimodernism Postmodernism*, cit., pp. 672-675.

<sup>15</sup> S. Kraft, *Cognitive Function and Women's Art*, in "Woman's Art Journal", 4/2 (1983), pp. 5-9.

<sup>16</sup> H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.A. Bois, B.H.D. Buchloh, , D. Joselit, *Art Since 1900: Modernism Antimodernism Postmodernism*, cit., pp. 576-580.

art»<sup>17</sup>. She commences her essay by pinpointing the superficial or, so to speak, stereotyped contribution of women to art as seen from a patriarchal perspective that steadily wants to keep the true essence – or nature – of art unruffled. She stigmatises, for instance, the kind of appeasement with which women are said to have contributed with «real emotion and autobiographical content», as well as with the introduction of «low traditional art forms»<sup>18</sup>. In Lippard's reflection such rhetoric is unveiled as an attempt to dilute the real contribution of Art Feminism and attenuate its radical claim for a paradigm shift in the (art) world. To the contrary, she demonstrates that feminist methods and theories have offered a social and bodily alternative to the patriarchal notion of evolution in art history, thus tackling the very notion of progress in art seen as a central concern of the art market in a capitalist world<sup>19</sup>. The consciousness about this patriarchal and extractivist situation leads Lippard to highlight Art Feminism's counterstrategy of developing an autonomous morphology of art that rests on a mimesis centred on women's actual social and bodily conditions, which at the same time redefine the natural circumstances of humanity as a whole:

At its most provocative and constructive, feminism questions all the precepts of art as we know it. [...] The goal of feminism is *to change the character of art*. What has prevented women from being really great artists is the fact that we have been unable to transform our circumstances into our subject matter, to use them to reveal the whole nature of the human condition<sup>20</sup>.

The insistence on the necessity to treat the subjects of the female nature anew, refusing to adapt to the patriarchal vision that shaped the image of women's social and even emotional life, was a central request also in the earlier theoretical writings of Austrian artist and activist VELIE EXPORT, the capitalised stage name of Waltraud Hollinger taken from a popular cigarette company, who became famous for her provocative public performances of bodily self-determination such as *TAPP und TASTKINO* (1968-1989)<sup>21</sup>. Writing about

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<sup>17</sup> L.R. Lippard, *The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s*, in "Art Journal", 40/1-2 (*Modernism, Revisionism, Plurism, and Post-Modernism*), 1980, pp. 362-365.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, p. 362.

<sup>19</sup> *Ivi*, p. 364.

<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, p. 363.

<sup>21</sup> Artwork ref.: MoMA, New York. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/159727>

*Woman's Art* in 1973, her intervention is radical, avoiding the German capitalisation of nouns viewed as a sign of patriarchy, and proactive at the same time, offering strategies to supersede the male gaze with artistic means<sup>22</sup>. In EXPORTS's words, the power of art lies in its morphological ability, since it provides signs and meanings that permeate the social construction of reality which, however, so far has been dominated by men who «treated the subjects of life in general, and the problems of emotional life», thus imposing their views also on gender-related issues<sup>23</sup>. For this very reason she suggests nothing but complete erasure of all the values and meanings that the patriarchal society has attributed to notions such as «love, fidelity, family, motherhood, spouse», in order to give women the opportunity of self-determination through the shaping of their own notions corresponding to their inner feelings and wishes, their social and natural conditions<sup>24</sup>. Interestingly, as compared to Lippard, EXPORT goes beyond the necessity to establish a peculiar – or, even, separate – field for the female condition to flower into the (art) world<sup>25</sup>, rather claiming that a general re-definition and re-alphabetisation of women's nature is needed to contrast the male gaze in art and the patriarchal state-of-affairs in society:

the question concerning what women can give to art and art can give to women, can be answered thus: to translate the specific situation of the woman into the artistic context is to construct signs and signals which, first, constitute new artistic messages and forms of expression and, second, retrospectively change the situation of the women<sup>26</sup>.

Another performance and body artist such as EXPORT, the American practitioner Mary Kelly became known for the deep personal involvement in her projects, which relied on the direct exploration of female bodily experience to overcome generic patterns of woman-nature mimesis and eradicate any attempt of patriarchal morphology<sup>27</sup>. In her 1981 remarks *Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism* Kelly reflects on the contribution of Art Feminism,

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<sup>22</sup> V. EXPORT, *Woman's art. A manifesto*, in "Neues Forum", XX/228, 1973, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> L.R. Lippard, *Projecting a Feminist Criticism*, cit., p. 339.

<sup>26</sup> V. EXPORT, *Woman's art. A manifesto*, cit., p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> E. Richards, *Materializing Blame: Martha Rosler and Mary Kelly*, in "Woman's Art Journal", 33/2, 2012, pp. 3-10.

especially through its take on Body Art, which markedly goes beyond EXPORT's morphological claim, since the American artist refers to the authenticity of the body as a means to overcome artistic morphology for good and substitute it with direct corporal experience<sup>28</sup>. In fact, she maintains that the sensations of the real body do «not pertain to the truth of visible forms» but, rather, they drag the viewer back to its essential content, which is the direct experience of natural conditions ascertained through one's own senses, such as with the experience of pain<sup>29</sup>. For this reason, in her own practice the specific situation of the women was to be the artist's own conditions which she dealt with in her performances and installations, such as *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), in order to address the discourse of the body in a way that highlighted the construction of the sexed subject. In Kelly's view, the corporal dimension of the woman is seen not as the repository of an artistic essence, but as a hermeneutic image that uncovers the true female identity behind the patriarchal façade. Hence, the woman artist's identity and body, perceived as a gendered subject, open to the possibility of a real encounter with women's sensations, emotions, psyche, and position in society – that is, a specific *conditio muliebris*, which is completely and irrevocably different from that of men, because:

[...] the [sexed] body is decentered and it is radically split; positioned; not simply *my* body, but *his* body, *her* body. Here, no third term emerges to salvage a transcendental sameness for aesthetic reflection. Within this system of representation, actual experience merely confirms an irrevocable difference in the field of the other.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Mimetic exploration of bodily conditions

The theoretical contribution of the above art feminist practitioners is a testimony to how theoretically informed woman artists drove towards a kind of morphological difference to men's art, which found substance in the specific mimetic quality of the female condition, thus changing the form of art<sup>31</sup>. In their reflections, acting in the art field became neither a

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<sup>28</sup> M. Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, Kegan Paul International, London 1983.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> K. Mondloch, *The Difference Problem: Art History and the Critical Legacy of 1980s Theoretical Feminism*, in "Art Journal", 71/2, 2012, pp. 18-31.



question of integration into the patriarchal art world and its male dominated perspective, nor one of creating a safe haven for women to indulge in their traditional dwellings and subject matters, but to change the character of art through a different aesthetic attitude derived from the *conditio muliebris* that is different from men's, precisely because it feels different to be a woman<sup>32</sup>. In this sense, it can be said that Lippard, EXPORT, and Kelly were coming to terms with the simplistic parallelism between woman and nature, which is partly nurtured by the primitive Mother Nature idealism of patriarchal ascendancy which, however, tends to pin down women to their reproductive role and confine them in the sphere of family matters that are not universal, as compared to male experience<sup>33</sup>.

In this perspective, one should not wonder that the *Siloueta Series* (1973-1978) of Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, in which she explored the abstracted forms of women and their bodily parts connected to a natural setting as in Pre-Colombian cultures, albeit seeking to access an omnipresent female force, ended up reinforcing the male gaze's tendency to attribute a functional necessity to women's closeness to nature<sup>34</sup>. Hinging on the natural forces narrative to seek out the «one universal energy which runs through everything», as expressed in Mendieta's own words, evoked a kind of natural alterity between women and man, but could not free women (and nature) from the male dominion<sup>35</sup>. The response of American artist Barbara Kruger to this sort of natural captivity came with a famous palimpsest of 1983 showing the sensuous shot of a female head, laying upside down, with eyes shut, as if taken from the advertisement industry and obliterated by the artist's words «We won't play nature to your culture», underlining how the image of the woman was still hostage to capitalist functionalism, natural idealisation, as well as patriarchal submission<sup>36</sup>.

At this point, a brief analysis of actual case studies spanning from the inception of Art Feminism up to the recent digital turn is due, such as to test how the relationship between woman's art and female nature evolved over the past five decades. For this purpose, I am

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<sup>32</sup> S. Kraft, *Cognitive Function and Women's Art*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> L.R. Lippard, *Projecting a Feminist Criticism*, cit., p. 339.

<sup>34</sup> J. Perrault, *Earth and Fire: Mendieta's Body of Work*, in P. Barreras del Rio, J. Perrault (eds.), *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective* (exh. cat.), New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York 1987, pp. 10-27.

<sup>35</sup> A. Mendieta, *A Selection of Statements and Notes*, in "Sulfur", 22, 1988, pp. 70-74.

<sup>36</sup> H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.A. Bois, B.H.D. Buchloh, D. Joselit, *Art Since 1900: Modernism Antimodernism Postmodernism*, cit., pp. 672-675.

considering an installation each of three woman artists belonging to subsequent generations who performed similar mimetic explorations of the female body, though each with changing Postmodernist means: the environmental installation *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979) by Mary Kelly, the video art installation *Corps étranger* (1994) by Mona Hatoum, and the interactive digital installation *Wet and Wavy Looks – Typhon coming on* (2016) by Sondra Perry. In these installations each artist devotes particular attention to the staging of bodily sensations that disclose the *conditio muliebris* – such as with control, uneasiness, trauma, and pain – and lead to the acknowledgment of a gender-specific corporal *feeling*, rather than of patriarchally stereotyped feminine *feelings*.

In her *Post-Partum Document*, which shocked the tabloids when it was shown at the ICA in London in 1976, Kelly leads the reflection on the nature of women taking her direct corporal experience into account after having lived through a defining female event such as childbirth and subsequent childcare<sup>37</sup>. Collecting, exhibiting, and reworking the objects belonging to the everyday of motherhood, like her child's baby onesies and stained nappy liners, she analyses the physical and psychological sensations in the development of the mother-son relationship, such as corporal pain and angst of failure, thus going beyond the autobiographical work to seize the kind of body politics bestowed on women in a patriarchal society<sup>38</sup>. Offering a bold feminist critique of male-oriented Conceptual Art, the American artist created a true report of motherhood exploring the female condition through the documentary representation of physical pain, psychological distress, and societal coercion due to childbirth and postpartum events<sup>39</sup>. The almost clinical methodology adopted for this installation did not just mock the coolness of many male conceptual artists, it made clear that in Kelly's view, who chaired the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union in London, the aim was not simply to replace men in art, but initiate a radical shift towards the societal inclusion of women through the fullness of their bodily concerns and their truly lived everyday experience<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> M. Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, cit., pp. 76-93.

<sup>38</sup> J.T. Paoletti, *Mary Kelly*, in *The Critical Eye/I* (exh. cat.), Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven 1984, pp. 20-25.

<sup>39</sup> P. McCloskey, *Post-Partum Document and Affect*, in "Studies in the Maternal", 5/1, 2013, pp. 1-22.

<sup>40</sup> A. Ventura, *Motherhood Is Hard Work*, in "Getty Research Institute News", May 4, 2002. Available at: <https://www.getty.edu/news/motherhood-is-hard-work-mary-kelly-postpartum-document/>

Roughly twenty years later, Palestinian-Lebanese artist Mona Hatoum, who relocated to Britain in 1975, equally sparked outrage in London with a video installation centred on her own endoscopic bodily exploration that earned her the Turner Prize nominee in 1995, albeit losing the award to young British uber-provocateur Damien Hirst who presented the infamous formaldehyde-dipped cow and calf cut in half<sup>41</sup>. Despite the tabloid critique, Hatoum's masterful work *Corps étranger* rightfully entered the canon of video art for its mesmerising and yet unsettling visual expansion of female corporality, since the endoscopic film is over-enlarged and projected onto the floor in a cylindric walk-in construction that the audience is forced to go through, literally finding itself inside the artist's body and hearing her amplified heartbeat<sup>42</sup>. What the visitor experiences is the record of a clinical analysis studying the woman's body by penetrating every orifice and hole, while the artist is only half-awake, thus unable to react to this alien body and its intrusive eye, though at the same time experiencing how its own female body looks estranged and becomes the other<sup>43</sup>. The result is a definition of deep female corporality seen both from the inside and the outside, a body that is voyeuristically watched and visually controlled at the same time, thus revealing women's condition on the background of patriarchy. Hatoum's walk-in installation succeeds in turning a medical examen into a spectacular device that amplifies the sensations of bodily unease, sexual exploitation, and social control over women's corporality originated by the male gaze, which is here incarnated by the intrusive endoscopic camera.

Again, two decades on, after the completion of the digital turn, with the interactive installation *Wet and Wavy Looks – Typhon coming on* African American artist Sondra Perry dragged the viewer into a dramatic re-enactment of extreme bodily conditions, as can be found in the state of enslavement. Perry is directly quoting the subtitle of the landscape masterpiece *The Slave Ship* (1840) by Joseph Mallord William Turner, which celebrated Britain's abolition of slavery by condemning the brutal act of throwing the bodies of dead

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<sup>41</sup> D. Mantoan, *The Road to Parnassus: Artists Strategies in Contemporary Art*, Vernon Press, Wilmington 2015, pp. 292-293.

<sup>42</sup> Artwork ref.: Centre Pompidou, Paris. Available at: <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/ressources/oeuvre/bnhmTX0>

<sup>43</sup> G. Coxhead, *Mona Hatoum: Review*, in "ArtReview", October 2016. Available at: <https://artreview.com/october-2016-review-mona-hatoum/>

slaves overboard to claim insurance<sup>44</sup>. Monumentally installed at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2018, the piece consists of a rowing machine filled with hair gel, attached to screens showing purple waves intercut with the Turner painting, which is digitally distorted to resemble skin or flesh<sup>45</sup>. The public is invited to sit on this rowing station made slippery, in order to inflict a coercive physical action and immerse the viewer into the body of enslaved people, thus feeling their mortal fatigue<sup>46</sup>. Of course, the body of the visitor is offered but a glimpse of the corporal experience of constraint and exhaustion that characterises the kind of exploitation enslaved people suffered in the crossing of the ocean, but this condition was based on power relations that still today define the politics of control over racialised bodies. It is of particular importance that this re-enactment is the work of an African American woman who concentrates on blackness and gender given the exposure of the African American female body to sexual, economic, societal, and political restraint, which hinges on in postcolonial societies in the form of coercive conformation to white norms and imagery, as well as psychological pain, physical fear, and social insecurity<sup>47</sup>.

#### 4. Postmodernist generations of corporal feeling

At the start of this little enquiry in gender and Postmodernism the aim was to define the *conditio muliebris* or, in any case, to seek for such a thing as the nature of women. The secondary aim was instead to understand whether there is a specific nature of women's art, at least since the inception of Postmodernism, which results in a different mimetic character capable of comprehending or acknowledging women's nature. Having reflected on the words and works of some paramount contributors to historical and more recent Art Feminism, it looks indeed they brought us nearer to discover the peculiarity of female condition. To begin with, the theoretical reflections of Lippard, EXPORT, and Kelly insist on the affirmation of a *conditio muliebris*, which is set both on natural and societal

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<sup>44</sup> M. Facos, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Art*, cit., p. 142.

<sup>45</sup> A. Coatman, *Sondra Perry on blackness, gender and internet culture*, in "RA Magazine", Spring, 2018. Available at: <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/magazine-sondra-perry-typhoon-coming-on-serpentine-galleries>

<sup>46</sup> Artwork ref.: MoMA, New York. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/221822>

<sup>47</sup> M. Kross, *Sondra Perry: The Kitchen*, in "Artforum", November 2016. Available at: <https://www.artforum.com/events/sondra-perry-226316/>

circumstances, giving way to a morphological difference based on gender that can be traced back to the specific mimetic quality of the female experience. Lippard's claim for an autonomous female morphology, EXPORT's attempt of a new alphabetisation of women's feeling, and Kelly's exploration of female bodily experience all go in the direction of highlighting the biological and social separation in gender related matters, thus contrasting the male gaze which confines women in the cage of generic natural and emotional patterns as done throughout Modernism. What emerges from this theoretical overview is not just a natural difference of *feelings* and sensitivity between women and men, but a difference in nature – that is, a difference of peculiar biological and psychological conditions, which are driven by a diverse mode of *feeling* and experiencing reality. Womanhood's very existence is different from being a man, both because of natural and societal circumstances, thus constituting a peculiar and autonomous *conditio muliebris*.

The art installations thus analysed, each conveniently distanced two decades apart, helped to dive into the female condition as seen from different generations of woman artists and with evolving means of Postmodernist practices. What holds the mentioned artworks together is their focus on an exploration of female corporality, which reveals a layered condition of women's nature and reality. In this sense, the *conditio muliebris* addresses a multiple dimension, based on social, sexual, reproductive, political, economic, and aesthetical elements at one and the same time. Kelly's report of motherhood is the documentary representation of reproductive distress and societal exploitation of the woman as mother and housewife. Hatoum's visual record of her corporality is a testimony of aesthetical, sexual, and political control of the woman's body under patriarchal conditions. Perry's re-enactment of the enslaved condition builds around the direct experience of physical exhaustion and economic exploitation of (female) bodies in the context of enduring colonialist and racialised power relations in society. Although through diverse mediatic strategies and diverging levels of interactivity, all three installations point at the complexity of sensations that characterises the *condition muliebris*, clearly negating the supposedly female simplicity of feelings. Furthermore, woman's nature is not treated as a mere question of choosing a subject matter, but rather as a morphological and aesthetic difference of feeling and experiencing reality. Eventually, it must be underlined that the

postmodernist practices they employ comprise evolving languages, techniques, and media strategies that successfully supersede the straightforward representation of women, in order to allow a direct aesthetic experience of female bodily awareness and sensations.

To answer the initial question, whether there is a true divergence in nature between women and men, the analysed texts and installations affirm the existence and necessity – at least since the inception of Postmodernism – of separate morphologies, as well as of a different aesthetic mimesis in art-related matters. As presented in the above paragraphs, art feminist theory and the discussed artworks envision what can be labelled as the *conditio muliebris* as very real, because it is about the reality – the world, so to speak – which women experience. And this female reality holds different natural and societal premises on the background of enduring patriarchal conditions, thus attributing a morphological unicity and specific mimetic aesthetics to the female condition. In short, it simply feels different to be a woman: that much is true in a bodily, psychological, and societal sense.