Looking as Women: The Paintings of Suzanne Valadon, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Frida Kahlo

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ABSTRACT

Many feminist critiques of the female nude in painting are premised on the argument that these images are produced solely for male pleasure and consumption. Shifting the focus to representations of the female nude by women artists allows a different interpretation. Suzanne Valadon, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Frida Kahlo are unusual as women painters in taking the nude as the central theme of their art. Their work poses some interesting questions about the relationship of women to sexual imagery. The author of this article investigates these questions — first, by looking at how their life histories may have influenced their relationship to painting the nude, then, by examining how their work represents women's experience. She argues that "looking as women" not only means bringing different kinds of experiences to the making of images; it is a conscious attempt to transform the conditions under which such images are produced and understood.

RÉSUMÉ

Un grand nombre de critiques féministes contre le nu féminin dans le domaine de la peinture sont fondées sur l'argument selon lequel ces images sont produites uniquement pour le plaisir des hommes et pour être consommés par ceux-ci. En se concentrant plutôt sur les représentations de femmes nues par d'autres femmes, on peut en avoir une différente interprétation. Suzanne Valadon, Paula Modersohn-Becker et Frida Kahlo sont des femmes peintres qui sortent de l'ordinaire car le thème central de leur oeuvre est le nu. Leurs tableaux posent des questions intéressantes à propos de la relation entre les femmes et les images sexuelles. L'auteure de cet article se penche sur ces questions en examinant d'abord la façon dont leur vie a peut-être influencé leur relation avec le nu puis la façon dont leur travail représente les expériences féminines. Elle maintient qu'une perspective de femme non seulement permet d'apporter différentes expériences à la création d'images, mais aussi constitue une tentative consciente de transformer les conditions dans lesquelles ces images sont produites et comprises.

FEMINISTS HAVE LONG BEEN INTERESTED in the representation of the female image. Considering how much of western art deals with female images, it is surprising how little attention has been directed towards investigation of the social conventions embedded in that imagery. The category of the nude in the history of art is a specific kind of representation.[1] It is an intersection for discourses on representation and sexuality.

The standard academic text on the subject is Kenneth Clark's *The Nude*.[2] Tracing the origin of the nude from antiquity to the nineteenth century, he reconstructs a classical ideal of feminine beauty. He then declares the death of the nude as an art form. From today's vantage point, it is possible to discern the nineteenth century as not heralding the death of the nude but its transformation.

In a discussion of Impressionist painting, modern art and contemporary advertising John Berger places the female nude within the construction of patriarchy.[3] He points out that in representations of the female form, men look and women are looked at. Female images are produced for consumption by male spectators. He then concedes that, in the history of painting, some of these images are exceptional. Drawing from an interpretation of the intentions and experiences of the individual artists, he establishes a group of exceptional nudes in the European tradition. These are created by the painter's view of the woman he paints, which is so exclusive as to render spectatorship impossible. Great art comes to be seen as a product of the individual artist in relation to a particular model. The image is thus displaced from a patriarchical context.

Artists produce work to be consumed in the marketplace. Art works are merchandised and sold to a buying and viewing public. Beginning in the nineteenth century, art became available to private, bourgeois collectors as opposed to being commissioned by either Church or state. The enlightened art collector purchased art as a status symbol. Purchasing art entailed entering into a complex relationship with both the object purchased and the artist who made it. The purchaser of the nude was acquiring and sharing in the creator's aesthetic-sexual experience.[4] This transaction was also a symbolic exchange of male sexuality between bohemian and bourgeois and from lower to upper classes.

During the rise of modern art, when young artists flocked to Paris to work and study, the city itself was undergoing dramatic changes. It was being physically transformed by Baron Haussman and Napoleon III in the 1850s and 1860s.[5] This transformation involved the rise of a new Parisian social order wherein the bourgeoisie, artists and prostitutes were drawn into the boulevards, parks and cafes.[6] The Second Empire collapsed in 1870. Its wake produced the Third Republic and a greatly expanded middle class. In the 1870s, the public arenas were bustling with activity. The painters later known as the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists produced their version of this modernity. Their painterly innovations and choice of subject matter occur within this context of social restructuring.

The roots of modern art are found in the rise of the bourgeois class in Paris during the late-nineteenth century. Taking Manet's (in)-famous painting *Olympia* (1863) (Figure 1) as the touchstone for modern painting, Timothy Clark demonstrates how this candid representation of the self-assured nude prostitute was a direct challenge to the mythic classlessness of Parisian bourgeois society. Olympia's direct stare towards the viewer, as much an invitation as a reproach, signified a commercial and sexual exchange integral to the male public sphere.[7] Clark presents modernity as quintessentially masculine and bourgeois.

The art and literature of this early modern period mainly accounts for the experiences of men. Pollock, in a critique of Clark, suggests that part of Olympia's infamy was due to her being exhibited in the Salon where respectable bourgeois ladies could be expected to be present. Janet Wolff, developing a similar

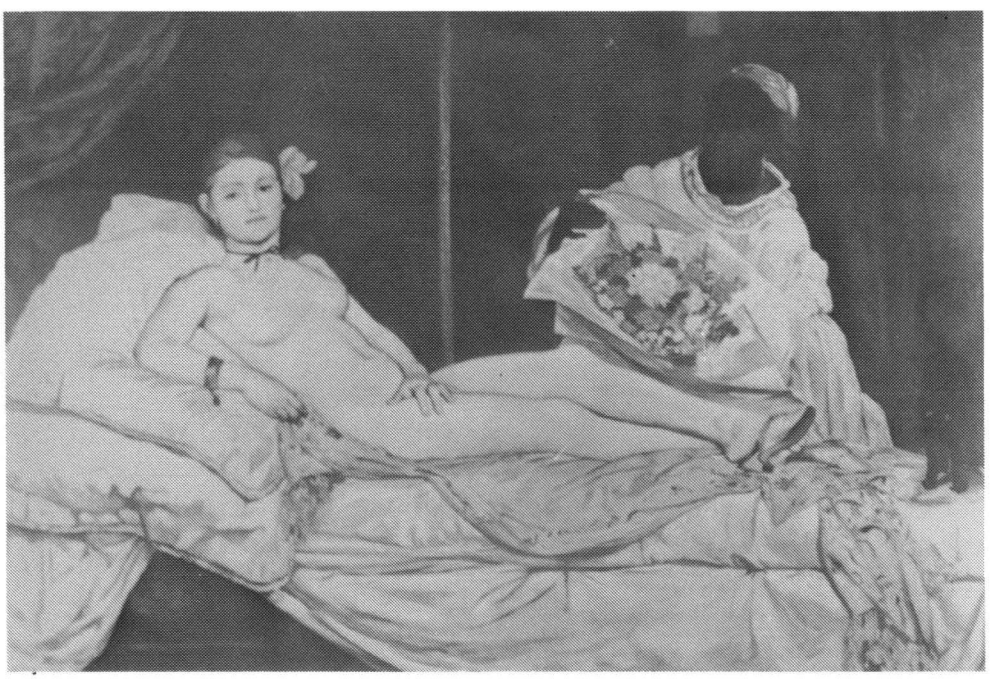

Figure 1. *Olympia* (1863). Edouard Manet (1832-1883). Musée de Louvre, Paris. Source: Horst Keller, *The Great Book of French Impressionism* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1980).

thesis regarding the literature of the same period, claims the central figure of the *flâneur* in the arts can only be male.[8] Only males had the freedom for the solitary stroll as a voyeuristic stranger in the city. Pollock and Wolff present modernity as rendering women's experience invisible.

In 1878, at the height of Impressionism, feminists Maris Deraismes and Leon Richer organized the first international congress of women's rights.[9] Impressionist painting bears no trace of this,[10] nor does it record the increasing number of women from the lower and middle classes who sought work and training outside the home. (In 1866, there were 2,768,000 women employed in the non-agricultural labour force in France.)[11] Few are the images of working women outside the domestic sphere.

The late-nineteenth century is also of interest because it is when women struggled to acquire equal access to art schools.[12] More women were becoming successful in gaining formal recognition in the arts. The work of such artists as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot is exemplary of this change.[13] Their paintings represent the experiences of bourgeois women. While we have documentation concerning the activities of some women artists during this era, it is also a time when many were effectively omitted from the history of art.[14]

In nineteeth-century Salon art, the female nude appeared in a number of guises: nymph, Venus, Magdalen and model in the artist's studio.[15] Late-nineteenth-century Impressionist painting enshrined a new guise: the prostitute. Despite the variety of disguises, the similarities among these paintings are striking. All are idealized images of the female form presented as objects for a male viewer/possessor.

A crack in the male domination of painting appears in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Coincident with the exhibition of Manet's *Olympia,* the art academies lost control over production and consumption in the art market. This change was associated with commercialization.[16] Painters became free from the strictures of academic training and released from the confines of the studio. It also facilitated the entrance of women into the occupation. The paintings of women Impressionists are concerned with representations of the private and domestic spheres.[17] Few were interested in or prepared to take on the painting of either the male or female nude.

Women artists were not admitted to the institutions of art until the 1880s and 1890s. Only in 1903 were they allowed to exhibit in the Prix de Rome.[18] Rosemary Betterton concludes that, while women may have had access to informal life drawing classes, painting from the nude was a relatively rare experience for women before 1900. They could not acquire the necessary technical skill to produce within the dominant genre. Painting the nude was more than a matter of skill; it was an exercise of power over the construction of artistic meanings based on the human body. Women were not only excluded from formal study of the nude but also from the power to determine the definition of high art.

Linda Nochlin suggests that the nineteenth century produced no art, certainly no high art, expressing women's erotic viewpoint.[19] This should not be interpreted as proof of women's absent eroticism, or corollary of the fact that nineteenth-century art mirrored reality. Given the non-existence of such venues for feminine sexuality, it would be impossible for women to create the equivalent of Toulouse-Lautrec's brothel scenes (Figure 2). Most women were forbidden to enter such establishments, let

Figure 2. *The Salon in the Rue des Moulins* (1894). Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901). Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi. Source: Horst Keller, *The Great Book of French Impressionism* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1980).

alone paint them. Like their male counterparts, many women artists came from the middle class.[20] Even if they should dare, few would flaunt sexual proclivity. Such daring would entail transgressing deeply held beliefs; however, not all women were bound to conventionality. Some were prepared to challenge conventional *mœurs* and a few did paint the nude.

Many feminist critiques of the female nude in painting are premised on the argument that these images are produced solely for male pleasure and consumption. These paintings objectify and degrade women. Such exclusive focusing on the male spectator leaves certain problems unexplained. It offers neither an explanation of how women look at images of women nor how women appear in images made by women. It renders invisible sexual representations created by women and undercuts feminine sexuality.

Shifting the focus to representations of the female nude by women artists allows a different interpretation. I suggest, following the lead of Kathy Meyers[21] and Rosemary Betterton,[22] women artists have created feminine images that are fundamentally different from those produced by their male colleagues. These images represent women's experience in ways that are meaningful for female — and not exclusively male — spectators. This difference cannot be assumed; it must be demonstrated. One method of doing so is to examine how personal experience is represented in an artist's work. Social background and femininity may produce work that is differently placed within the dominant forms of representation. Such factors will also affect representation of the nude. This recovery of women's experience is part of the project of retrieving what has been lost, revisioning the classic accounts and rendering visible previously obscured aspects of social life.

Given the bias of western culture to fetishizing the female body, the nude is a difficult genre for women artists.[23] It is enshrined as an icon of culture that epitomizes and objectifies female sexuality. For these reasons it is resistant, although not impervious, to change. Suzanne Valadon, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Frida Kahlo are unusual as women painters in taking the nude as the central theme of their art.[24] Their work, produced at the end of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries, poses some interesting questions about the women's relationship to sexual imagery. I will investigate these questions by looking at how the life histories of these three painters may have influenced their relationship to the nude, and by examining how their work represents women's experience.

Suzanne Valadon and Paula Modersohn-Becker were two of the first women artists to work extensively with the nude female form and their paintings collude with the conventional imagery.[25] Frida Kahlo's work follows theirs. Her imagery is more challenging than her predecessors'.

Marie-Clémentine (Suzanne) Valadon (1865-1938) was born into the working class.[26] She was the daughter of a laundress. The identity of her father remains unknown. As a child, Marie-Clémentine had shown an interest in art. Valadon reports, "ever since I was nine, [I] had been drawing on any piece of paper I could find."[27] Class background barred Valadon from access to professional or academic training. Even in Montmartre in the 1880s, as the illegitimate daughter of a part-time seamstress and cleaning woman, she occupied a marginal position. She was apprenticed at the age of eleven to a milliner's workshop in the Place de Clichy where she toiled for three years. Other jobs followed as waitress, dish-

washer, street vendor and groom in a livery stables. From 1881 to 1883, she worked as a trapeze artist in a circus troupe. An accident at the circus forced her to give up acrobatics for work as an artists' model.

In the 1880s, Montmartre was the artists' neighbourhood. It provided cheap studios and picturesque views. Women wanting to be hired as artists' models stood on view in the Place Pigalle. The model offered her body for sale. She was usually of lower-class origin. The pay was low and established by negotiation; there were clear parallels with prostitution. Even if a model led a virtuous life, she existed outside the codes of respectable femininity. This background clearly marginalized Valadon from bourgeois respectability.

Valadon's ten-year career as a model was outstanding. Beginning in 1883, the list of famous artists for whom she posed includes Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec. It was after Toulouse-Lautrec mentioned to Valadon, "you who pose in the nude for old men, you ought to be called Suzanne,"[28] that she changed her name. An intimate liaison between artist and model lasted from 1883 to 1885. She continued modelling for him until 1888. It was Toulouse-Lautrec who first encouraged her intellectual and artistic development. He introduced her to Edgar Degas who was destined to become her longtime mentor and friend. Under Degas's encouragement, she exhibited for the first time in 1894.

Working as a professional artists' model made Valadon's experience of art markedly different from both her male and female contemporaries. This is significant for her artwork. Modelling in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries signified a particular relationship of artistic practice to sexuality. The artist-model relationship was between a male creator and a female object of his inspiration.[29] Often the relationship was transformed from a covertly to an overtly sexual one. Rare was the model who progressed beyond the passive object of the male artist's gaze to become an artist herself.

The period of Valadon's career from the 1880s to 1938 saw the popularity of the bohemian as a central myth of artistic life. She embraced this masculine stereotype; she took a succession of lovers and adopted a free-wheeling lifestyle. Jeanine Warnod reports, upon meeting Valadon, that "she made a distinctly eccentric impression, mannish and gypsylike."[30] She had strained relationships with her mother and her son: Maurice Utrillo, alcoholic, mentally unstable and also an artist. While Valadon was becoming successful, the mental condition of her son deteriorated. As her income increased, she became increasingly extravagant. In 1923 she, her son and her current lover went to live in a dilapidated thirteenth-century castle. It was not long before the notorious trio became estranged. Valadon returned alone to Montmartre in 1926. Her son married in 1935. She died of a stroke on April 7, 1938, at the age of seventy-three. Valadon's social marginality provided the context for an unconventional, androgynous lifestyle.

Unlike Valadon, Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) came from a bourgeois background and was formally trained as both artist and school teacher.[31] Born into a cultured German family, she studied drawing at an early age from a local instructor in Bremen. While living with relatives, she attended art school in London at age 16. She completed, at her parents' insistence, two years at a teachers' training school prior to attending the Berlin School for women artists from 1896 to 1898. On completion she moved to Worpswede, near Bremen, the site of a colony of landscape artists.

In 1900, Paula Becker journeyed to Paris, where she continued to paint and become part of the artistic community. She was a member a small clique including Clara Westhoff (a sculptor who married the poet Rainer Maria Rilke), the sculptor Rodin and the landscape painter Otto Modersohn. Marrying in 1901, she and husband Modersohn returned to Worpswede. Here she writes in her diary, "I have cried a lot in my first year of marriage ... It is my experience that marriage does not make one happier." She was also ambivalent towards her role as stepmother to Modersohn's young daughter. Her position in German society as a married woman left her feeling that her artistic inspiration was dwindling. On three occasions she left home for Paris to develop her painting style, in search of new techniques from the work of such post-Impressionist painters as Gauguin, Cézanne and Van Gogh.

During a final stay in Paris from February 1906 to April 1907, she separated from her husband and devoted her entire energies to art. In May 1906, she writes to her sister, "I am becoming something — I am living the most intensely happy time of my life." Family and friends intervened and pressed for her return to Worpswede. Attempting reconciliation, her husband visited Paris. During one of his visits, she became pregnant and returned with him to Germany. In November 1907, she gave birth to a daughter and died, three weeks later, of a lung embolism and heart attack.

Her diary records an ambivalence toward marriage, motherhood and art. She also writes of having little sympathy for the growing women's movement. She defines artistic ambitions as "masculine" and remarks on the mutual exclusivity of female sexual love and artistic success. Modersohn-Becker was caught between her art and her socially conventional background.

Frida Kahlo (1910-1954) was born outside Mexico City in the suburb of Coyoacan. Bedridden at age 16 as a result of a bus accident, she gave up plans to become a doctor and began painting.[32] It is estimated that Frida Kahlo had 30 operations in the years between her accident in 1925 and her death in 1954. In the accident, her spine was fractured, her pelvis shattered and her foot broken. For long periods she was bedridden, in pain and incapacitated. She was unable to have children and suffered miscarriages and medical abortions.

Originally she painted for herself. On the encouragement of the surrealist Andre Breton, she began presenting exhibitions and marketing her paintings. Kahlo is noted for a series of self-portraits. The settings and details were drawn from elements in Mexican folklore. Intermittently disabled throughout adulthood, she often painted by using an easel and mirror attached to her bed.

Kahlo was self-taught and worked outside of the traditions of European and American art. She painted in what has been called a "dialect."[33] Her style draws on the popular art of Mexico as well as traditional Mexican Catholic art. Many of its images are of martyrdom and the Passion. Her iconography gives precedence to intensity of expression over beauty.

In 1929, she married the famous Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. Their house, which is now the Frida Kahlo Museum, was a gathering place for North American and European artists, intellectuals and leftist political leaders. It was rumoured that Frida had an affair with Trotsky whose assassination was somehow linked to his stay at the Kahlo and Rivera household. In 1939, Kahlo and Rivera divorced, remarrying two years later.

It is important to note that Diego Rivera had close links with the Russian and Mexican avant-gardes. More than any other Mexican artist, Rivera left his mark on Mexican art. He created monumental public murals and large paintings that were inspired by the ideological and political aims of both the Russian and the Mexican revolutions (Figure 3). His style fused elements from the early Italian Renaissance and Cubism with caricature, from Mexican pre-Columbian and popular art. While Rivera's art was grandiose Kahlo's was diminutive. While his stressed the public sphere and politics of national revolution, hers explored the private sphere and the politics of femininity.

All three of these women — Valadon, Modersohn-Becker and Kahlo — were socially marginalized. They turned to art as a vehicle for self-expression and rejected many aspects of the traditional feminine role. All lived during eras of massive social transformations: France and Germany of the 1880s and early 1900s and Mexico after the revolution. All developed their art within a social context. Class background varied: working class Valadon, and bourgeois Modersohn-Becker and Kahlo. Political persuasion varied: Kahlo, an avowed Marxist, Valadon and Modersohn-Becker, seemingly apolitical. I agree with Parker and Pollock[34] that it is no longer simply enough to conjure up and assert an alternative set of images of women. The paintings of these three painters provide a base from which to begin questioning the traditional relationship between women and art. What they shared was the exploration of their bodies for art. As women they expressed a fundamentally different view of the nude. Unlike their male contemporaries, they expressed the conflicts of their feminine self-image. Their work tells us something of what it is like to be a modern woman rather than what modern men wish women were like.

Valadon's art is strongly influenced by her social background. Thematic and stylistic innovations make her work different. The female nude is very frequently shown in a social relationship with another woman, often a clothed and older servant or mother figure. For models Valadon used her mother, son, friends and servants. Her figures, such as *Nude Getting into Bath Beside Seated Grandmother* (1908) (Figure 4), are always shown engaged in activity. Often there are interrelationships or a kind of communication between the women. The experiences represented are familiar and commonplace.

Valadon is not simply offering us another version of the nude; she is challenging its central tenet. Her drawings show a series of interactions between women and children. This theme continues in her paintings, although, more frequently, the nude is seen in isolation. Many show two women of different ages, as in the work on the theme of mother and daughter, *The Cast Off Doll* (1921) (Figure 5). In this painting, a naked adolescent girl looks at herself in a hand mirror, her mother gently drying her back with a towel and an abandoned doll lying at her feet. The picture depicts the onset of puberty and the girl's nascent awareness of her own sexuality. The girl twists away from her mother; the physical contact between them is broken by their separate glances. In such works, Valadon is questioning the dominant tradition of the nude as spectacle for the male viewer. She focuses upon women's sense of the relationship between state of mind and experience of their bodies in processes of changing and aging.

Her insistence on the individuality of her models, their differences in body size, shape and age suggests a relative indifference to conventional ideals of sexual attractiveness. Her *Self-Portrait* (1932) (Figure 6), painted when

Figure 3. A section of Diego Rivera's Rockefeller Center mural as repainted in the Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City (1934). Photo: Raúl Salinas. Source: Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

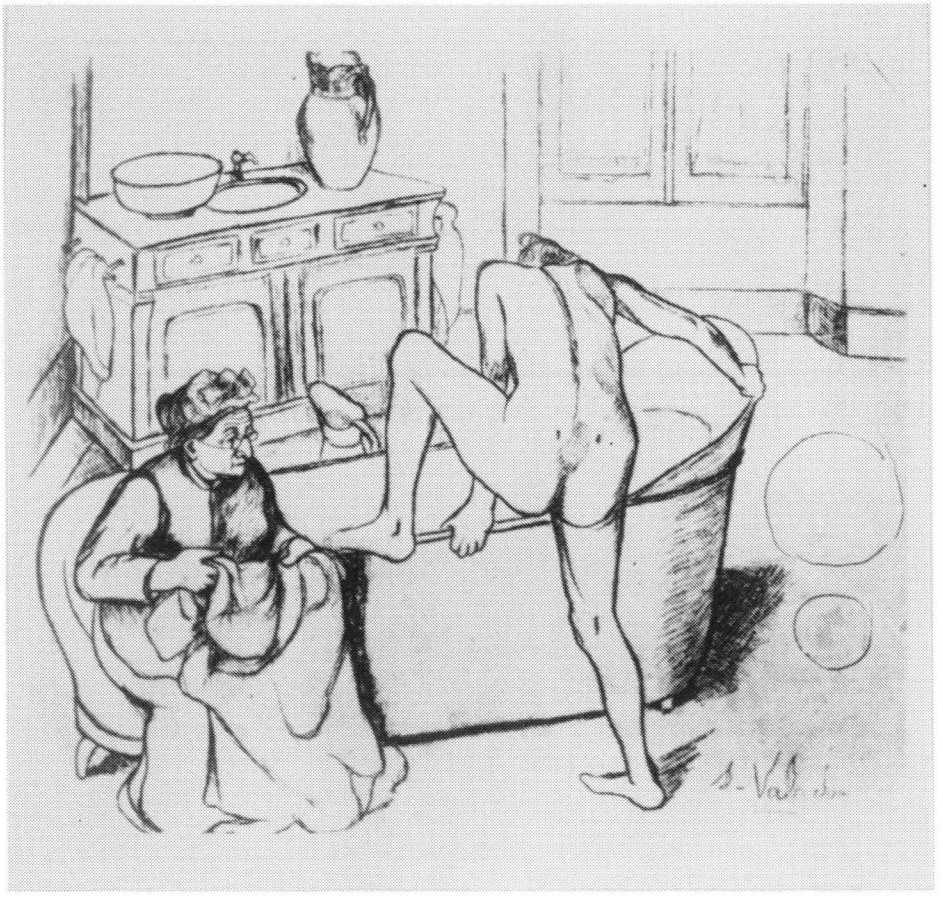

Figure 4. *Nude Getting Into Bath Beside Seated Grandmother/ Grandmother and Young Girl Stepping into the Bath* (1908). Suzanne Valadon (1867-1938). 11⅜" × 15⅜" (29 × 39 cm). Private Collection.

Source: Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990).

Figure 5. *The Cast Off Doll/The Abandoned Doll* (1921). Suzanne Valadon (1867-1938). 135 × 95 cm.

Figure 6. *Self-Portrait* (1932). Suzanne Valadon.

Both Figures: Collection of Paul Pétridès. Source: Karen Petersen and J.J. Wilson, *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1976).

she was sixty-five, shows her naked from the waist up. She meets the viewer with made-up face, jewellery and cropped hair. This painting is disconcerting in its combination of self-image and nude form and the subject's refusal to compromise with old age. Even more now than when it was painted, the image asserts the recognition of women's own view of their bodies against the tyranny of images of youth, beauty and attractiveness endlessly reflected in patriarchical culture.

Valadon's work was exhibited with some of the Impressionists' in private galleries. There are both parallels and contrasts between her work and that of Renoir and Degas. In Renoir's *The Bathers* (1884-87) (Figure 7) and Degas's *The Tub* (1886) (Figure 8) can be observed the male Impressionist project of representing woman "as she is": woman in and of nature. Comparing Valadon's early drawings (e.g., Figure 4) with those of Degas (e.g., Figure 8) demonstrates how she borrowed and then modified his conception of the nude.[35] The Valadon drawing, contrary to the soft pastels of the Degas, mutes the seductiveness of the nude. Where his pastel is soft and sensuous, her lines are harsh and deny erotic sensation. Her women look awkward; his are graceful. Her lines are discontinuous; his are undulating. Her drawing denies the spectator an ideal viewing position, thus transforming the narcissistic gesture of the woman in Degas's work.

Paula Modersohn-Becker's nude self-portraits might be the first such paintings by a woman artist and they are ambiguous. In her famed *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace* (1906) (Figure 9), a series of conflicts is apparent. At one level, the painting establishes a parallel between woman and nature.[36] It is also intended as a portrait depicting a self-possessed individual. The assertiveness of the portrait head competes with the imagery of the

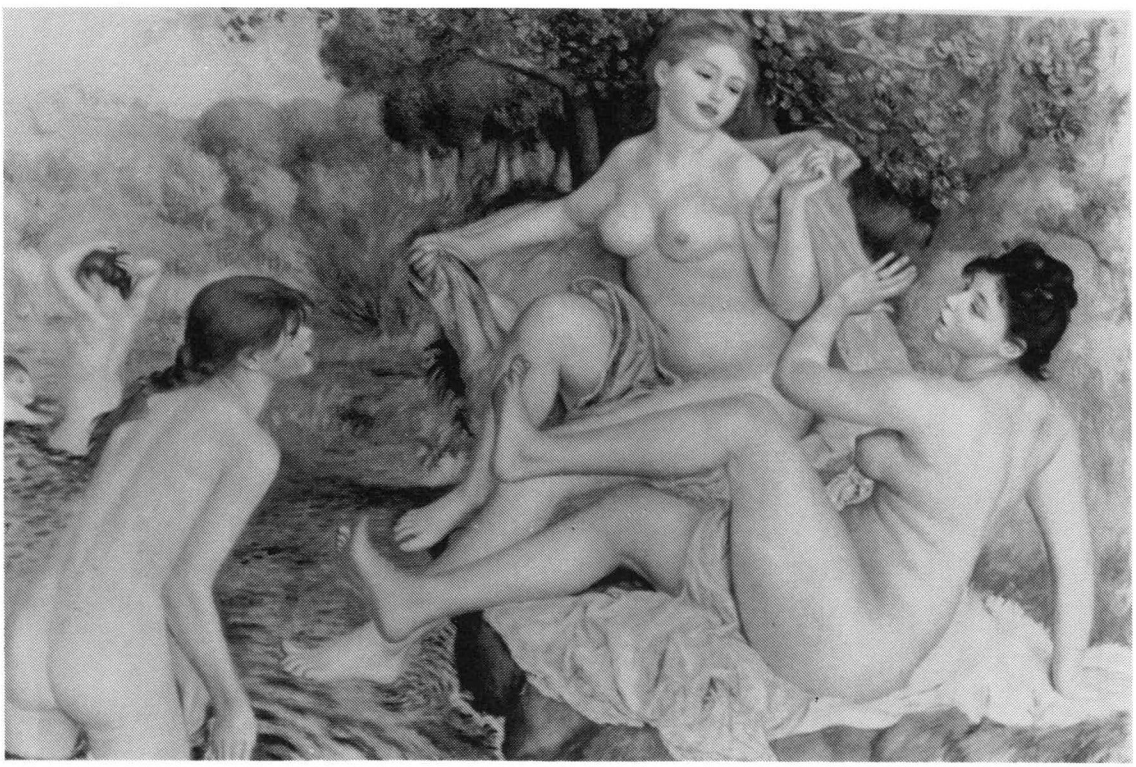

Figure 7. *The Bathers* (1884-87). Auguste Renoir (1841-1919). Private Collection. Source: Horst Keller, *The Great Book of French Impressionism* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1980).

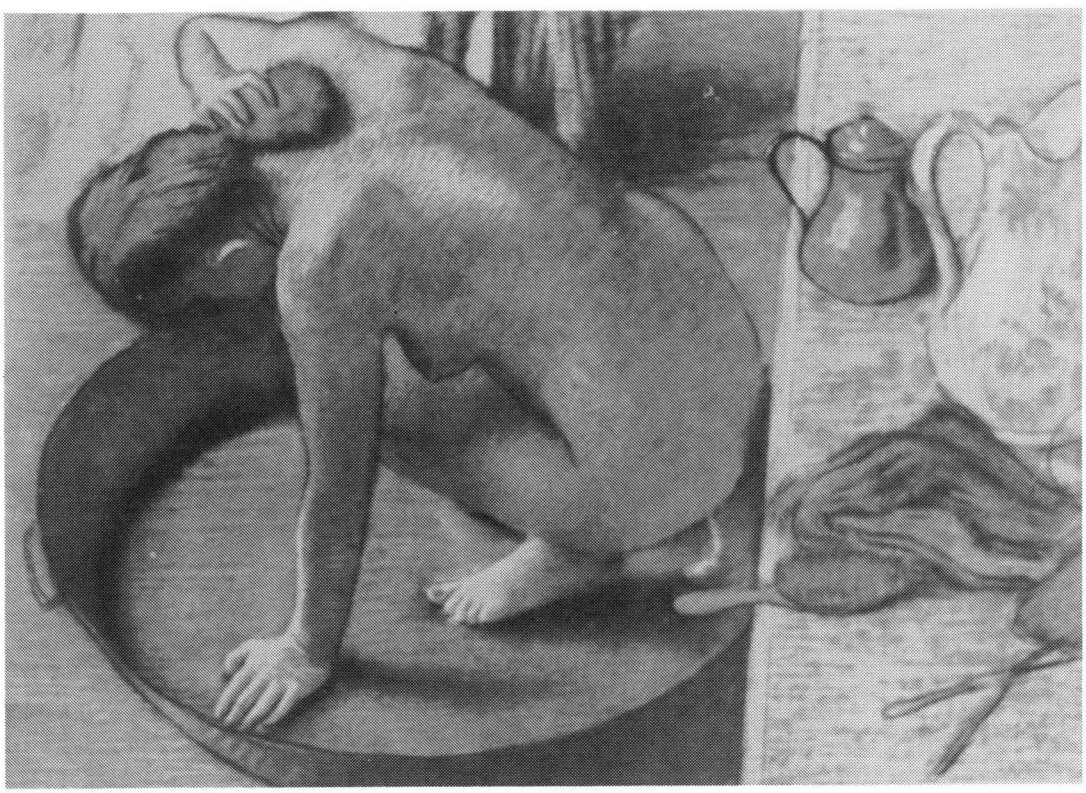

Figure 8. *The Tub* (1886). Edgar Degas (1834-1917). Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Source: Anne Roquebert, *Edgar Degas* (Paris: Éditions Cercle d'Art, 1988).

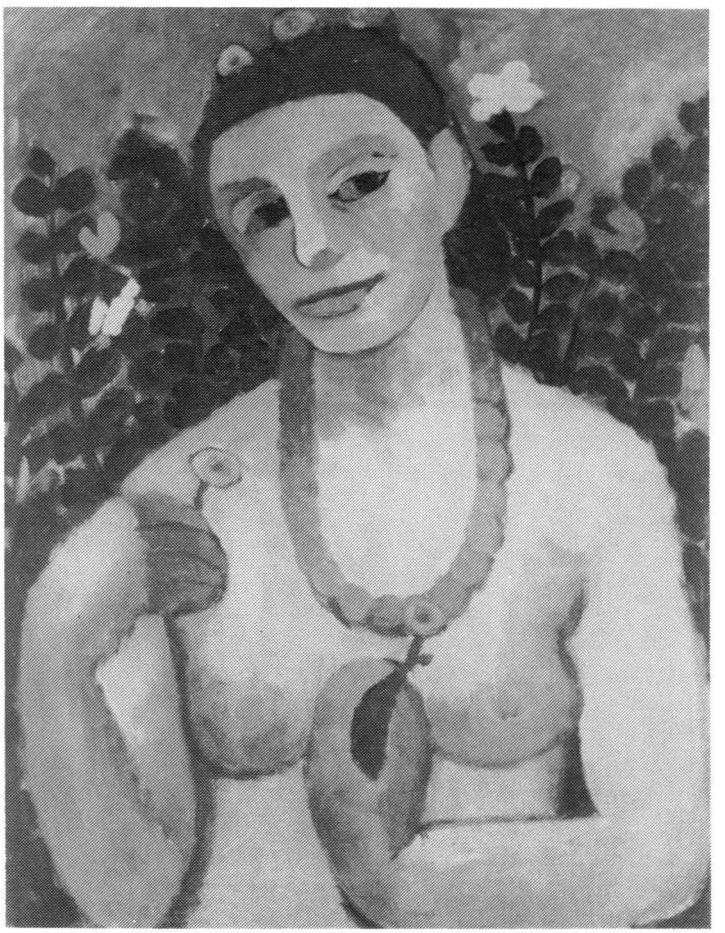

Figure 9. *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace* (1906). Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907). Kunstmuseum, Basel. Source: Karen Petersen and J.J. Wilson, *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1976).

nude female body surrounded by vegetation. The portrait connotations conflict with the setting and its associated meanings. The painting can be interpreted as an attempt to produce a new relationship between notions of woman and notions of art.

In Modersohn-Becker's *Self-Portrait*, we see an artist taking pleasure in her body. The self she presents is vibrantly alive and shameless. Her calm gaze, meeting that of the viewer, suggests that she recognizes no separation of her body from her mind and spirit. Above the naked female flesh are the detailed features of a powerful and determined human being. Uncommon is the image of a naked woman whose head so outweighs her body.

The painting was influenced by Paul Gauguin whose work she viewed during one of her trips to Paris. While there are stylistic similarities between the two artists, Modersohn-Becker's project is different. Gauguin, like many of his male contemporaries, exploited the metaphor of woman as nature. A comparison of the female body with desirable fruit, particularly evident in Gauguin's paintings, is a well-established convention in erotic art. In his *Tahitian Women with Mango Blossoms* (1899) (Figure 10), the breasts of the women are obviously likened to both fruit and flower.[37] For Modersohn-Becker, there are parallel images of fecundity and a connection between women and nature. We see the coupling of women with flowers and luxuriant foliage. Her nude is also a self-portrait. It is intended as a representation of a European woman in pursuit of a vocation. This contrasts with Gauguin's idealisation of exotic non-European women. His images are unchanging, elemental and depersonalized. Rather than his stylized vision of Eve in the garden, in Modersohn-Becker we find a self-possessed individual. Modersohn-Becker's *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace* establishes a link between notions of creativity and fecundity as well as woman and art.

A private world gave rise to Frida Kahlo's art. She often painted from her bed, the most private part of the personal world of the home. Her work represents an intersection of women's art and domestic space. It draws our attention to the interconnectedness of the two. Her art is an ironic and bitter comment on women's experience. The feminine sphere is devoid of pleasure and replaced by the experience of pain, including the pain associated with her physical inability to live out a feminine role in motherhood. This pain is shown in *Childbirth/My Birth* (1932) (Figure 11) and *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) (Figure 12).

Kahlo works in a "dialect" as opposed to the language of high art. She was self-taught and worked outside the traditions of European art. Some historians have incorrectly attempted to classify her work as surrealist, a title she personally rejected. Her work is idiosyncratic and emerges directly from her life experiences and her society. She drew from Mexican Catholic art and embraced, as did Rivera, the popular arts of the time.

The contrasts between Kahlo and Rivera's work are striking. Rivera was concerned with creating a monumental art and a revolutionary heritage (Figure 3). His style borrowed much from the European tradition. He fuses elements of early Renaissance and Modern painting. Unlike Diego, Frida's paintings emerge directly from her private life. Her paintings are interior self-portraits of personal suffering and fantasy. In contrast to Rivera's massive public murals, her paintings are intimate in scale. She references the private world of woman's body and her own direct experience.

In *Henry Ford Hospital* (Figure 12), Kahlo represents her body on a bed surrounded by

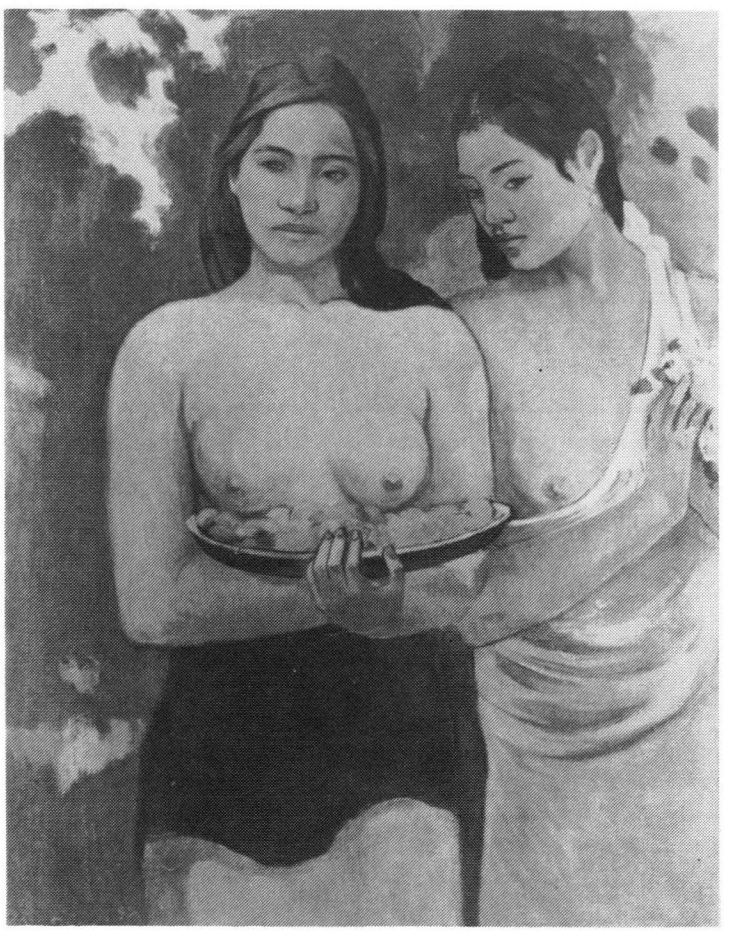

Figure 10. *Tahitian Women with Mango Blossoms* (1899). Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). 37" × 28¾" (94 × 73 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source: Robert Goldwater, *Paul Gauguin* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1973).

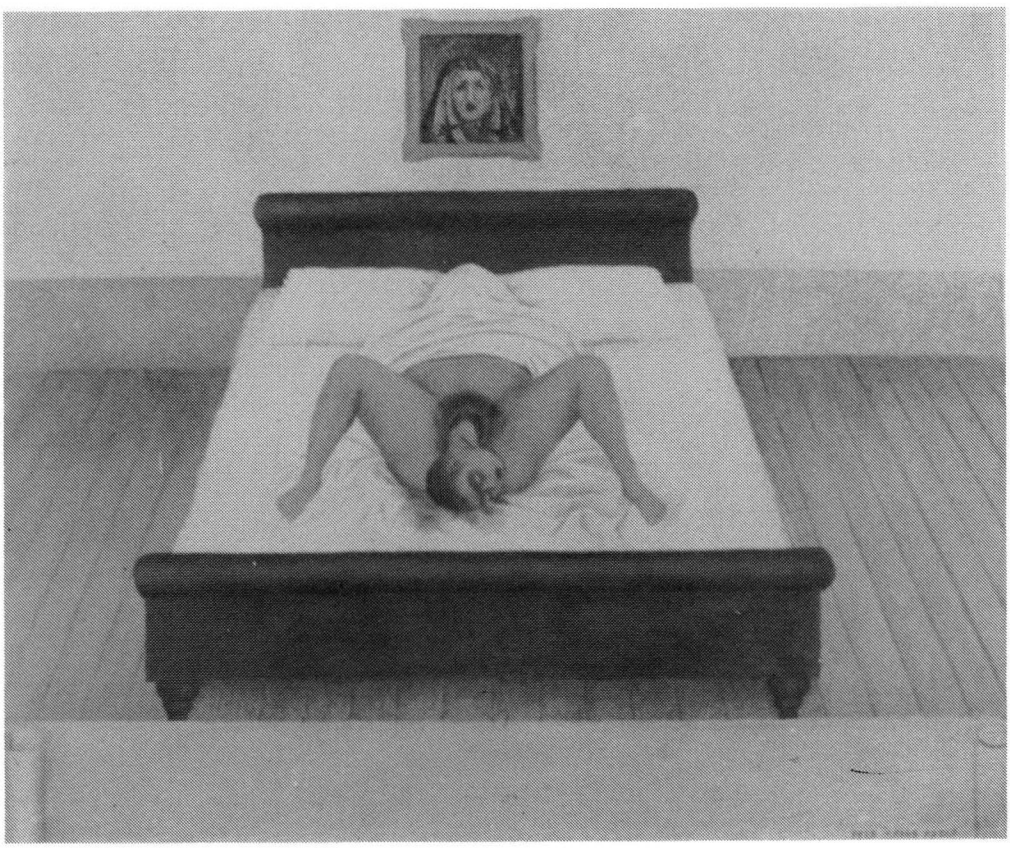

Figure 11. *Childbirth/My Birth* (1932). Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). 12½" × 14". Collection of Edgar J. Kaufmann, Jr., New York. Photo: Jim Kalett. Source: Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

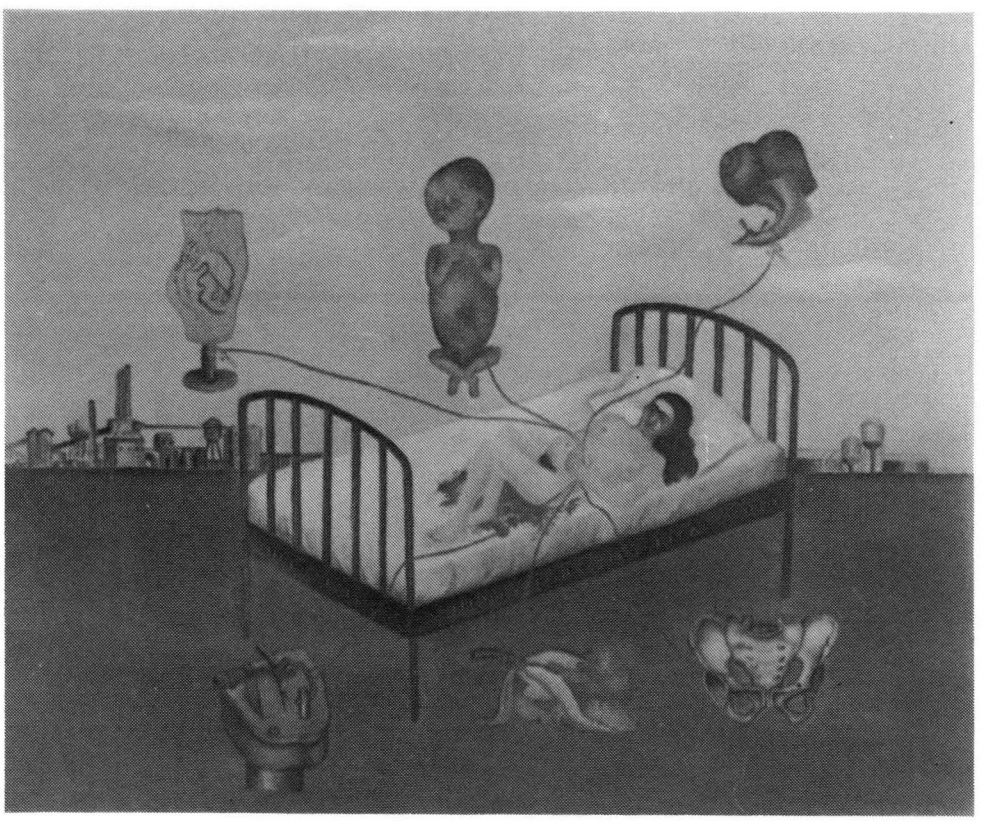

Figure 12. *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932). Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). 12¼"×14". Collection of Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City. Photo: Raúl Salinas. Source: Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

emblematic objects. The style of the iconography is Mexican popularist. This painting is remarkable, for the ideal of motherhood takes on an image of erotic violence — a violence directed towards the self, not projected outwards. It depicts a physiological reality of women's sexuality. This is clearly a nude perceived by a woman rather than a masculine idealization.

In the painting, Kahlo lies naked in a hospital bed and haemorrhages onto a sheet; tears run down her cheek; her stomach is swollen by pregnancy. She holds six ribbons. From these float six objects symbolizing her emotions. There is a fetus and a salmon pink torso on a pedestal. The torso she describes as her "idea of explaining the insides of a woman." The snail depicts the slowness of the miscarriage. The strange piece of machinery has been interpreted as either an allegory to her reconstructed hips or an iron vice suggesting the wracking of pain. There is also a copied medical illustration of the pelvic bones that she considered to be the cause of the miscarriage. She said of the lavender orchid, given to her in the hospital by Rivera, "when I painted it, I had the idea of a sexual thing mixed with the sentimental." This orchid can also be interpreted as symbolic of an extracted uterus. The impact of the painting is that of helplessness, desolation and despair.

Of *Childbirth/My Birth* (Figure 11), Kahlo states "how I imagined I was born." It is perhaps one of the most disturbing images of childbirth ever created. An infant's large, blood-covered and inert head emerges from between the spread legs of the mother. The heavy eyebrows identify the child as Kahlo's. The baby looks lifeless. The woman's head and chest are covered by a sheet as if she, too, had died in childbirth. As a substitute for the mother's head, an image of another mother, the Virgin of Sorrows, gazes sorrowfully and ineffectually upon the scene of double death. The painting refers both to the artist's own birth as well as her recent miscarriage.

What do the art and lives of these women tell us about artistic imagery and social construction of art?

Valadon's female nudes fuse observation with a knowledge of the female body based on her experience as a model. She emphasizes context, moment and physical action. Instead of presenting a sensuous female body as a comfortable surface isolated and controlled by the male gaze, she emphasizes awkward gestures and images of women in control of their own movement. Valadon often placed her figures in specific domestic settings and surrounded them with images of domesticity and community.

Modersohn-Becker's *Self-Portrait* is ambiguous. She reproduces elements of the idealization of woman as nature. She also reproduces a woman as a self-possessed individual. She presents an image of woman with a steadfast, calm gaze surrounded by lush foliage. The juxtaposition disturbs the viewer.

Kahlo's paintings emerge directly from her life — her physical and emotional suffering. Often bedridden, living and working within the confines of her childhood home, she took herself as the main subject of art. She painted her own image and immediate relationships. Her art is a material manifestation of her interior experiences. In some respects, her painting was a form of therapy — a way of coping with pain, warding off despair and regaining control over her crushed and broken body. Painting brought pleasure, hope and power.

The paintings of all of these women artists are differently placed within the dominant forms of representation. In showing women as

individuals, often engaged in mundane and sometimes painful activities, the nude's primary signification as a sexual object for men is transformed. For these women the nude is a different site of experience. It is an intersection for discourses on pain as well as pleasure, sociability as well as intimacy, and aging as well as youth. All deny the sensuous illusion of the idealized nude. All render the woman's body less available to the male voyeuristic gaze. If the male spectator's presence is always implied in representation of the female nude, then at least Valadon, Modersohn-Becker and Kahlo make a significant challenge to that assumption.

While the art and literature of the early Modern period mainly accounts for the experience of men, it is also true that this viewpoint was under revision by some women artists. Unlike their male contemporaries, these three women created images that are meaningful for female spectators. Unlike the *flâneur,* the cool and detached stranger created by male artists, the modern woman is represented as deeply embedded in the pain and pleasures of contradictory social relations. The radical separation of the public and private is directly challenged in the tensions and strains experienced by these women and reproduced in their art. Developing with the rise of bourgeois society, Modernism kicks off the struggle of women to attain identity of self as subject in conflict with an identity of self as object. "Looking as women" not only means bringing different kinds of experiences to the making and reading of images; it is a conscious attempt to transform the conditions under which such images are produced, seen and understood.

NOTES

1. The female nude body is predominantly represented in the history of art as "the nude." Throughout this text, the two terms "the nude" and the "female nude" are used interchangeably with reference to representations of the female nude body in paintings.
2. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon, 1956).
3. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972).
4. See also Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early 20th Century Vanguard Painting," *Art Forum* (December 1973): 30-39.
5. See also Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990).
6. T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); Chadwick, op cit.; Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
7. See also Marcia Pointon, "Interior Portraits: Women, Physiology and the Male Artist," *Feminist Review* 22 (February 1986): 5-22; Lynda Nead, "Representation, Sexuality and the Female Nude," *Art History* 6 (June 1983): 227-235.
8. Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity," *Theory, Culture and Society* 2.3 (1985): 37-46.
9. Chadwick 216.
10. Chadwick 216.
11. Chadwick 216.
12. Pointon 6.
13. Tamar Garb, *Women Impressionists* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1986).
14. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).
15. Parker and Pollock 116.
16. T.J. Clark, op. cit.
17. Garb, op cit.
18. Rosemary Betterton, "How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," *Feminist Review* 19 (March 1985) 3-24, esp. 12.
19. Linda Nochlin, "Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art," *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730-1970,* eds. Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 9-15.

20. Duncan 33.
21. Kathy Meyers, "Towards a Feminist Erotica," *Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today,* ed. H. Robinson (New York: Universe Books, 1988), 283-296.
22. Betterton 12.
23. Betterton 4.
24. See Betterton; Chadwick; Duncan; Parker and Pollock.
25. Chadwick 266.
26. The biographical materials on Valadon are drawn primarily from separate — and sometimes contradictory — accounts by Jeanine Warnod, *Suzanne Valadon* (New York: Crown, 1981) and Betterton, 3-24. The confusion surrounding her early biography is perhaps due, as Warnod reports, to Valadon's penchant for embellishing and reinventing her life history each time she was asked or inspired to relate it to friends.
27. Warnod 40.
28. Warnod 37.
29. C.J. Bulliet, *The Courtezan Olympia: An Intimate Survey of Artists and Their Mistress-Models* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1930).
30. Warnod 5.
31. Principle sources for the biographical materials on Modersohn-Becker are Paula Modersohn-Becker, *The Letters and Journals,* ed. Gunter Busch and Liselotte von Reinken (New York: Taplinger, 1983); Perry Gillian, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Her Life and Work* (London: Women's Press, 1979). Other sources include "Paula Modersohn-Becker: Self-Portrait," *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts*, eds. Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt (New York: Feminist Press, 1980) 180-181; and Martha Davidson, "Paula Modersohn-Becker: Struggle Between Life and Art," *The Feminist Art Journal* 2.4 (1975): 1-5.
32. Biographical materials on Frida Kahlo are drawn from Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); as well as from Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, "Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti," *Visual and Other Pleasures,* ed. Laura Mulvey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 81-110, and Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt, "Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair," *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts,* eds. Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt (New York: Feminist Press, 1980) 182-184.
33. Mulvey 81-110; Joan Borsa, "Towards a Politics of Location: Rethinking Marginality," *Canadian Women's Studies* 11.1 (1990): 36-39.
34. Parker and Pollock 123-132.
35. Betterton 17-18.
36. In the landscape, the female nude signified the identification of women's bodies as a "natural" representative of fecundity.
37. Nochlin 9-15.