of the aesthetics of film. Also, by working with Deleuzian concepts of time and memory and Benjamin's work on allegory, its contributors reveal new ways of viewing at times foreign to feminist film theory. On the other hand, *Feminism and Film* offers a very serious and clear review of contemporary feminist film theory before attempting to open new theoretical pathways. Unfortunately, in her desire to bridge the gap between feminism and film, Maggie Humm sometimes creates a distance much too wide between the filmic text and the theory she favours. The film then vanishes behind the theoretical discourse. Only when it does not, does the argument becomes thought provoking. However, what both works certainly offer is a variety of insights which demonstrate the plurality of feminist film theories. This richness of theoretical perspectives confirms the presence of "multiple voices in film criticism." Since some of the films selected are usually considered part of an official canon, it is also an invitation to revisit the films that were analysed, in the hope of sharpening our critical subjectivities.

Josette Déléas
Mount Saint Vincent University

Feminism and Contemporary Art: the Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter. Jo Anna Isaak. Routledge, London and New York, 1996.; illustrations; xiv + 247 pages; ISBN 0-415-08015-0.

An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body. Rosemary Betterton. Routledge, London and New York, 1996.; illustrations; xiv + 240 pages; ISBN 0-415-11085-8.

How is it that so many educated persons have learned *not* to see contemporary visual art? Speaking as a university curator, I find it a cruel irony that the struggles of feminist artists to gain a purchase in critical discourse should be frustrated not only by sexism, but also by an academic disciplinary hierarchy that privileges verbal texts. Not to mention the campus feminisms that profess to rescue women from victimization by images. I undertake this review in hopes that Jo Anna Isaak's and Rosemary Betterton's interdisciplinary scholarship will persuade readers of the relevance of critical visual practice to the feminist project.

Rosemary Betterton teaches art history at Sheffield Hallam University in England. Jo Anna Isaak, who years ago taught English at Mount Saint Vincent University, now teaches at William and Mary College, New York. Both authors avoid defining feminist artmaking as either simply a matter of artistic intention, or as a fixed set of appearances. Instead they analyze the discursive effects of visual art on the viewer - in this case, themselves. Both support their arguments by citing individual works of art within a specified theoretical context, giving their observations a concreteness and a tendentious urgency that I find engaging. The level of these texts is far from elementary, however; readers with background in cultural criticism, psychoanalytic theory and perhaps art history will find them easiest to read. Both books are extensively illustrated in black and white.

Rather than trace a history of feminist artmaking, each writer has divided her book into thematically discreet chapters. Betterton, for example, treats the problematic of artistic gender and authorship and the representation of maternity and women's sexual desire in the course of seven intensely focused essays. Her anthology marshals its argument through a study of the imagery of women's suffrage, an overview of strategic uses of abjection in art, a journey through women's non-representational painting, and a lucid analysis of the implications of assisted reproductive technologies for a feminist politics of representation. While citing these issues in passing and invoking many of the same theoretical sources (Irigaray, Kristeva, Haraway) Isaak proceeds rather differently. To my mind, this difference between an art historian and a literary scholar reveals the structuring effects of the authors' respective disciplinary orientations.

While ostensibly sharing Betterton's concern with women's reclamation of bodily

discourse and embodied subjectivity, Isaak for the most part steers clear of historical specificity. Her book formulates a universalizing account of the pleasures offered by feminist imagery, treating laughter as "the transfer point of power relations" and a source of "sensuous solidarity" (3). Such an emphasis on aesthetic pleasure is to be expected from Isaak, whose brilliant thesis in comparative aesthetics, *The Ruin of Representation in Modernist Art and Texts* appeared in 1986. The blitheness of her prose in *Women's Laughter* conveys a writer's delight in transgressive gestures and makes a carnival of her own wickedly subversive interpretations. Despite its appeal, however, this is a book to be read with scepticism *after* one has read *An Intimate Distance*.

In *Women's Laughter*, Isaak's fondness for linguistic reflexiveness and rhetorical surprise spreads her narrative thinly over a smorgasbord of art, most completed since 1970 by American, Canadian and Russian women. Though Isaak's international scope encompasses a critique of racism (Carrie Mae Weems, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith), the nationality of the Canadians Elizabeth Mackenzie and Janice Gurney passes unmentioned and the Russians are gently patronized ("the most hospitable people I have met"- p.7) in a book whose bias is decidedly, if unintentionally, American. In a similar vein, though the chapter is informative, Isaak's nominations for feminism of artists and artworks from post-*perestroika* Russia remain mystifyingly arbitrary - unless one considers the role of Russian expatriate intellectuals in the New York art market, and their advocacy of a Westernized feminist orthodoxy to "backward" compatriots seeking a niche in the U.S. marketplace.

Isaak's unqualified references to "the Slavic temperament," "the people," "the body," and other ideologically freighted constructs produce a cognitive dissonance, a paradoxical negation of women's achievements as cultural subjects and producers. She exacerbates this conflict by legitimating the anti-authoritarian work of women artists through the prior insights of writers: Freud, Bakhtin, Lacan and feminist literary thinkers. Absorbed in textual play, Isaak presents art as though it were a demonstration of literary precepts, thus reproducing the gender binarism that positions artists in the feminized realm of the intuitive and the derivative, always subordinate to a more self-conscious written culture. Was it carelessness or complacency that led her to write that "Lacan's formulation that 'the woman does not exist' put an end to the attempts to locate an essential femininity which preoccupied a number of feminist artists working in the 1970s" (6)? Could it be true that, under the banner of theory, art has won the battle for social constructionism? Or ought we to believe, as the Russian artist Svetlana Kopystianskaya is quoted as saying, that "[the institutionalized primacy of] literature drives the visual properties of an artwork into the background" (124)?

Isaak's diffuseness contrasts starkly with Betterton's dense and rigorous writing. As an historian and a materialist feminist, Betterton is scrupulous about crediting women artists of the past for enabling the achievements of contemporary practitioners. She takes the trouble to situate herself as a mother, a scholarly *bricoleuse* and a defender of emergent artists. Particularly in her chapters on British women's suffrage and the maternal nudes of Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker, she introduces copious contextual detail that keeps her argument historically grounded, never condemning the past for failing to satisfy present-day definitions of authentic feminist commitment. In general, Betterton draws her subject matter from existing self-representations of the Women's Movement and the production of 20th-century women artists. But in her essay "Metaphors of Motherhood and Assisted Reproductive Technologies" she proposes a new theme for feminist art based on the fetal iconography of medical technology and its spill-over into advertising and legal discourse. In this chapter the figure of the mother as an active social subject returns; will she be erased or emancipated by A.R.T.?

Throughout the book, Betterton traces the relationships between first and second wave feminism, technological developments and artistic modernism, skilfully integrating theoretical analysis and original research. Her close readings of Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, and her recasting of fetishism as an enabling critical concept admirably support her call for a feminist practice of non-

representational painting. Given the current identification of abstraction with patriarchal modernism, this claim alone is likely to make her work controversial. And, with an adventurousness that one might expect from a stylish performer such as Isaak, Betterton demonstrates how women artists find ways of articulating critical themes - for example, the maternal body as representational subject in 1906 Germany - before any discursive framework for such representations emerges in the culture at large. In a climate of naturalized sexual difference, wherein "women have babies and men make art," it is indeed radical of Käthe Kollwitz to infer that maternal subjectivity might be "the precondition of artistic production rather than, as contemporary discourse insisted, its very antithesis"(45).

The respective authors' choices of art and artists rarely overlap, except in the case of art-world celebrities such as Mary Kelly and Cindy Sherman. Betterton's analyses usefully sort out visual strategies (appropriation, inversion, deconstruction, seriality, pastiche) while assessing the contextual validity of each and its position within a given practice (painting, installation, photo-text). Isaak appears to take for granted the reader's familiarity with critical visual practice. This is regrettable, since the pleasure of understanding the intellectual choices available to artists at various points in history would compensate for the disappointment of having to view their art in black and white.

Ingrid Jenkner
Mount Saint Vincent University

Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories. Joan Young Gregg. SUNY Series in Medieval Studies. Paul E. Szarmach, ed. New York: State University of New York Press, 1997; 275 pages; ISBN 0-7914-3418-4; $20.95 US.

To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts. Joan M. Ferrante. Women of letters series. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, editors. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997. 295 pages; ISBN 0-253-33254-0

The medieval period abounds in representations of women both idealized and demonized. On one hand, Joan Young Gregg gives us stories such as the one about a priest who sees a vision of his dead mother: "from whose head a dark flame arose; on her lips and tongue a horrible toad was gnawing, and from her breasts two serpents hung, sucking fiercely at her paps" - all of which are seen as punishments for her luxurious dress, her wicked speech, and her lecherousness during her lifetime. On the other hand, Joan Ferrante provides examples of how, at around the same time, someone like Bishop Hildebert of Lavardin could write to a woman named Muriel in response to her poetry: "Whatever you breathe out is immortal and the world/ adores your work as divine/ You put down by your wit celebrated poets and bards,/ and both sexes are stunned by your eloquence." As medievalists have pointed out before, such an image of divine perfection is the obverse of the preceding picture of uncontrollable female carnality that was repeatedly painted and denounced in the pulpit. These two facets of the medieval Christian view of women are illustrated separately by Gregg and Ferrante, who also provide, in the course of their studies, new materials for feminist historians and critics to think through - and not just those working in medieval studies.

In *Devils, Women, and Jews,* Gregg examines the more commonplace assumption that medieval Christianity suppressed and stereotyped women, and she does so by collecting homiletic exempla, short instructional narratives used in sermons, particularly from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The section on women is embedded in discussions and examples of stories about devils and Jews - an "unholy trio" as Gregg points out, which was perceived to be connected "by pride, disobedience, and carnality." For those interested in representations of women, this broader context allows a more complete look at how late medieval Christian writers conflated images of demonized others, but the book would serve equally as well as