Because it is the first wide-ranging account of its kind to be produced by the Museum of Modern Art, I particularly wanted *Modern Women* to be a milestone for feminist art history. I was thus all the more disappointed when it fell slightly short of this goal. Cornelia Butler, the MoMA curator and co-editor (with Alexandra Schwartz) of the volume, encourages readers to think in such optimistic feminist terms in her introductory essay, and Aruna D’Souza, in considering MoMA’s feminist future, even suggests that the museum might consider how it could become a “site for community-building and for the utopian recreation of art worlds” (68). But I’m not convinced. Of course *Modern Women* is a milestone for the Museum of Modern Art’s active engagement with (rather than resistance to) feminism, but we have barely even traveled the first mile. A sketch of MoMA’s feminist history takes no more than two sentences. *Modern Women* follows—and was fundamentally shaped by—the museum’s first feminist event, *The Feminist Future* (2007), a symposium featuring artists, art historians, and curators that holds the record as MoMA’s best-ever attended single event (22). *The Feminist Future* set the stage for the survey exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at PS 1 ([click here for review](http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/1711)); this has been followed by retrospective exhibitions of the painter Marlene Dumas and performance artist Marina Abramovic, as well as a re-hang of the photography collection drawing on works by women, *Pictures by Women: A History of Modern Photography* (May 7, 2010–April 18, 2011 [click here for review](http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/1711)). End of story. As the book’s subtitle—*Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*—suggests, this publication is at its best in the essays and catalogue entries that begin to unravel MoMA’s ambivalence about its modern women. I hope that this volume is part of a broader ongoing feminist transformation of MoMA and not the last word on our modern women.

As Helen Molesworth remarks, it is easy to participate in “the ever-popular sport of MoMA-bashing” (501). Moving beyond such ritualized complaining, Butler’s editorial introduction is more than simply pro forma. She offers an engaging account of MoMA’s problematic encounter with and resistance to feminism from the early 1970s to recent years. Her essay establishes the kind of feminist voice that the editors desired for the volume, but that it unfortunately does not sustain. Of all the essays in the collection, Griselda Pollock’s “The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women” has all the hallmarks of a new classic in feminist art history. The real political stakes in “MoMA-bashing” are revealed in Pollock’s framing questions: “how can we account for the counterintuitive fact that despite every form of evidence to the contrary, and despite everything that made the modernization of gender roles fundamental to modernity itself, the dominant vision of modern art created by the most influential American museum systematically failed to register the intensely visible artistic participation of women in making modernism modern?” (34; emphasis in original) Rather than focusing simply on the absence of women, Pollock offers
theoretical insight into the institution’s psychological investment in the “history of great men” (38). This fixation with male artists generates a specifically masculine form of narcissistic identification. Drawing on the work of Sarah Kofman, Pollock argues that the “cult of the hero” (38) is aligned with the first ego ideal, the father. This generates a gender-overdetermined confluence of subject formation via the paternal with the narcissistic identification of hero worship. The museum’s traditional focus on artistic biography—the monographic approach—reinforces a masculine narcissistic identification: “Far from being gender-neutral and indifferent, museological art history has been a powerful inscription of a self-reflecting, narcissistic, masculinist vision in which men act and create and ‘woman’ is positioned as other, a resource for art” (39). A woman artist, Pollock points out, cannot so easily fulfill the paternal-heroic role of ego ideal. And women (art historians and curators) who submit to the logic of this masculine institution are compelled to “learn to become intellectual ‘transvestites’ by identifying with masculinity, the only ideal, precisely because the devaluation of the feminine offers no compensatory gratification for those who would study artists who are women” (38). This is both a profound insight into the depth of the problem faced by feminist art historians and curators, and it explains why simply adding women to the existing account of modern art is not adequate.

The rest of the book is divided into three sections: “Early Modern,” “Midcentury” and “Contemporary.” Each of these eras is split between a series of short catalogue entries on individual artists followed by longer essays on particular topics. The catalogue entries are consistent with the genre: a representative snapshot view of an artist’s oeuvre that is typically grounded in a traditional biographical approach. Given Pollock’s cautions with regard to the biographical, perhaps this should have been the first place to experiment with different methodological approaches. But this was not to be. Some of the essays in the “Early Modern” section—if not the catalogue entries—suggest a displacement of the traditional monographic approach, most notably T’ai Smith’s “A Collective and Its Individuals: The Bauhaus and Its Women.” Smith addresses the hierarchy of art versus craft, and the gendering of individual versus collective production, in ways that resonate with Pollock’s notion of the male artist as ego ideal. Smith points out the extent to which the monographic approach has determined the institutional positioning of the Bauhaus, resulting in the erasure of its women. But her essay is not simply a recovery of these lost women. Rather, she offers a carefully considered displacement of the established monographic approach. In her focus on “relationships rather than individuals” (160; emphasis in original), Smith reveals that one of the icons of Bauhaus design, the so-called Breuer chair, is a collaboration between the light tubular steel structure of Marcel Breuer and the weighty reinforced fabric of Gunta Stölzl. Because Stölzl’s mercerized cotton and Eisengarn (iron yarn) fabric is used as a structural component in the design of the club chair, it fundamentally disrupts the opposition between structure and surface typical of the gendered division of labor seen with furniture design.

This emphasis on collaborative relationships is also central to Beatriz Colomina’s essay in the “Early Modern” section, “With, or Without you: The Ghosts of Modern Architecture.” Like Smith, she develops the tension between the fundamentally collaborative aspects of architectural practice and the museum’s investment in the male monograph. Her engaging archival study of architectural “couplings” (218) as a model of influence includes Alison and Peter Smithson’s identification with Ray and Charles Eames. Colomina’s idea of the precursor couple, not individual male hero, mobilizes the biographical in critical opposition to the pull of institutional desire that Pollock calls masculine narcissism. Sally Stein’s essay on the institutional history of MoMA’s Photography Department similarly raises questions of gendered collaboration. During the Second World War, Nancy Newhall took over from her husband, Beaumont Newhall, as a curator of photography. What might have happened, Stein wonders, if MoMA had agreed to the Newhalls’ suggestion after demobilization that they share the position? This could indeed have changed the much criticized patriarchal history—of Edward Steichen, John Szarkowski, and Peter Galassi—in the curating and collecting of photography at the museum.

For a museum collection so invested in the historical avant-gardes (Dada, Surrealism, and the Russian Avant-Garde) and in New York School painting, it seems a peculiar choice to almost completely overlook these major twentieth-century topics. “Women Artists and the Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1912–34” by Starr Figura is the only essay to represent the historical avant-gardes. The volume contains no discussion of Dada or Surrealist women, except as comparative examples in an essay on contemporary art, and the great midcentury painters—Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, and Joan Mitchell—are mentioned only in passing. This latter absence leaves a gaping hole in the “Midcentury” section. With the exception of Luis Pérez-Oramas’s complex and fascinating account of abstraction in Latin American art of the 1950s–1960s, this section is the most dissatisfying, largely because of issues of coverage. Juliet Kinchin’s “Women, MoMA, and Midcentury Design” is the fourth essay on design in the volume. Despite her thoughtful account of the social aspects of
design in the 1940s, by this point I was feeling a little weary of what seemed to be an overemphasis on this aspect of the collection. Some confusion about periodizing contributed to the general sense of this central section being somewhat diluted. The “Midcentury” essays by Sally Berger, Yuko Hasegawa, and Barbara London all extended substantially into the contemporary, whereas the first “Contemporary” essay, by Alexandra Schwartz, is focused on the 1960s and 1970s.

The “Contemporary” section for the most part avoids a direct address to “feminist art” in favor of a perspective that is slightly askance. Schwartz’s “Mind, Body, Sculpture: Alice Aycock, Mary Miss, Jackie Winsor in the 1970s” offers an engaging discussion of the influence of Yvonne Rainer and minimalist dance on these feminist women who were not making “feminist art.” Their resistance to “feminine imagery” (416) was in no sense a rejection of feminism per se. In fact, as Schwartz points out, Miss was co-founder of both the Women’s Slide Registry and the Heresies Collective (416). Rainer provided these post-minimalist women with a feminist bridge from the universal phenomenological body to a more nuanced psychologically inflected approach that accounted for a gendered body. Johanna Burton provides a valuable critical contextualization of the volume’s seeming avoidance of “feminist art” by framing her account of the 1980s in relation to recent debates about MoMA’s belated feminist turn. Gretchen Wagner’s refreshing essay, “Riot on the Page: Thirty Years of Zines by Women,” suggests new intersections for the treatment of contemporary feminist practices in relation to the alternative music scene, performance, and new media practices.

The last two essays in the volume address contemporary themes while simultaneously engaging substantial issues of feminist methodology. Huey Copeland’s “In the Wake of the Negress” is an ambitious reconsideration of the contradictions of African American femininity within twentieth-century art. While I craved for more in-depth analysis of the contemporary art examples, Copeland’s critical concept of the “negress” is an original engagement with the fraught question of primitivism in modern and contemporary art. This is a key theme in modern art, but aside from Copeland’s important new contribution, it is not substantially addressed in the volume. “How to Install Art as a Feminist,” by Helen Molesworth, concludes Modern Women with an inspiring engagement with feminist ideas of influence. Although Molesworth is not exclusively concerned with painting, her valuable consideration of the medium only further highlights the short shrift given to it in the volume. The centrality of such heroic father figures as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning to MoMA’s traditional museological narrative makes Molesworth’s discussion of painting all the more relevant, especially given the earlier discussion of masculine narcissism. Molesworth’s engagement with new feminist models of influence also resonates with Pollock’s psychoanalytic approach. Displacing the more typical Oedipal understanding of rivalrous influence, she explores two alternative feminist ideas. Drawing on the work of Lisa Tickner (507) and Mignon Nixon (509), Molesworth couples the idea of the rhizomatic alliance with the horizontality of sibling rivalry. The latter idea is drawn from Juliet Mitchell’s recent work, and the former from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Yet these two approaches are not really compatible: the idea of the rhizome is a means of displacing altogether the model of the family tree. In Molesworth’s cacophony of relatives—“nieces, nephews, cousins, sisters and brothers” (512)—she conjures up once more its genealogical boughs. As feminist art historians challenge the dominance of the monographic approach, perhaps feminist curators (at MoMA and beyond) might find ways of displacing the family tree altogether in their staging of modern women.

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