

The Repetition of Difference

Helen Grace



Anne Ferran, **Untitled**, 1984
(from *Carnal Knowledge* series) gelatin silver print, 39.5 x 58.5cm

Within recent feminist theory a certain glamour has become attached to the idea of 'difference'. This is particularly so within women's studies in the U.S. (as we know them through journals like *Signs*, conferences with titles like 'The Future of *Difference*', anthologies like 'Writing and *Difference*', exhibition catalogues like '*Difference: on Representation and Sexuality*'). A similar fascination with difference exists in those cultural studies that concern themselves with subcultures and a 'politics of style'.

This privileging of the term 'difference' no doubt stems from its crucial status in linguistics, for there the ability to conceptualize difference marks access to

language itself and hence entry into the Symbolic.

In all these areas the notion of difference is one that remains couched in generalities. We are all familiar however with the mobilisation of difference in other more specific contexts: for example, in fashion magazines where the characters who people the pages repetitively declare: "I like to be different." (complete with photographs of clothes and accessories which make it so easy to achieve this difference). So we already know a good deal about the uniformity of subjects committed to an insistence on their individual difference, and the uses to which this has been put.

Difference, even when considered in general, is never an absolute, an end in itself (as it is assumed to be both in the last example and in some of the earlier ones), but is always arbitrary and defined in relation to the other term in the equation, repetition. The space of the repetitive, the pre-Symbolic, the undifferentiated, the 'half-light of the Imaginary', is regarded as a negative space, and one would not be arguing for a return to this space (which is impossible; language is always the path of no return). Within certain avant-garde and feminist approaches the pre-Symbolic, the Semiotic, is recovered as 'the feminine'; it is also the space of the hysteric, the psychotic and is



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consequently privileged within those reversals which are a feature of art's Romantic imaginings.

However, it is not a reversal which is being suggested here, but rather a shift of emphasis from difference to a consideration of the potentially more interesting tension which exists *between* difference and repetition.

(It has to be at least acknowledged that one is engaged in a certain contradiction here, in writing about art work: any such exercise, by virtue of identifying and separating out some work from a field of apparent repetitions, is necessarily involved in a construction of difference, which in spite of one's best intentions can be translated into market value. Nonetheless, other issues do exist and can never be entirely collapsed into a question of the circulation of commodities. Nor is it possible to escape this circulation) . . .

In considering the tension between difference and repetition to which I have referred, I want to use some recent work which, I think, speaks of these concerns. The connections which I am drawing did not strike me at first and are perhaps an effect of trying to write about the work. At the same time, it would be readily acknowledged that the work itself produced the desire to write.

Photography is that medium which most insistently speaks of repetition. It not only enjoys an assumed capacity to faithfully repeat what it sees, to repeat 'the truth', but also revels in its capacity to repeat itself, endlessly, through the processes of mechanical reproduction. Ironically (in view of art's concerns with perception and truth) it is art history which has been most dependent on a belief in this capacity of photography. We experience art works

through the reproduction rather than the original, and the reproduction serves to produce the original as original. It comes as no surprise then that the use of photography's 'objectivity' can be structured to enhance the insights of the art historian, especially when the 'truth' of the object is so easily concealed by photography.

For example, Wolfflin is able to exploit the limitations of photography to maximum effect in this way:

The reproduction is too small for us to obtain a very clear idea of the treatment in detail, yet the contrast of

style makes itself felt with the utmost clearness. Firstly, the ST JAMES of Sansovino is an example of classic silhouette effect. Unfortunately, the photo is not taken from the absolutely characteristic front view and hence the rhythm looks somewhat vague. We can see where the mistake lies — in the slab at the feet. The photographer stood too far to the left . . . If we take up the right standpoint, the whole thing becomes clear at once, and the clearest view is also the view of complete rhythmic self-sufficiency.¹

Anne Ferran's suite of photographs entitled *Carnal Knowledge* evokes the classical and the sculptural, both of which, in this case, the photographic leaves quite literally for dead. Images of sleep and death and the ideal of youth and femininity are seen through the texture of stone. The work focuses on the detail of gestures, which only the photographic can present, and is dependent on that history of black and white reproductions of classical art which haunts contemporary art.

Because the work is literally the representation of gestures, which are, as it were, petrified by a history of representation, we can also begin to understand another of the sources of 'fragmentation', 'quotation', 'appropriation'. These descriptive categories are often identified as qualities of the post-modern in art, but what is being suggested here is that they are predictable effects of the photographic and its mobilisation, ultimately, in processes of commodity fetishism (including the fetishization of knowledge).

Carnal Knowledge is 'captioned' with a piece of written text which is itself an image inscribed on a stone slab by the



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photographic process:

Ovid tells the story of Jupiter, mellowed by deep draughts of nectar, teasing Juno:

"Of course you women get far more pleasure out of love than men do."

Juno denies this is true and the opinion of Tiresias is sought in settling the matter, since he has experienced love both as a man and a woman. He confirms what Jupiter has said, whereupon Juno becomes very indignant and condemns the judge to eternal blindness — which Jupiter, unable to reverse, modifies by granting Tiresias the power to know the future . . .

The space which has to be traversed — that of language, desire, the body and knowledge — is that same risky terrain where Tiresias, the seer, came to a state of knowledge in blindness.

So, a set of immediately recognizable contemporary concerns is given a past, a place in a certain order of things, an order which is here being challenged.

Carnal Knowledge deploys a number of problematic signs — youth, beauty, femininity — which become distanced

by the photographic, opening up the possibility of rethinking that most monotonous of concerns — the look or the gaze.

In the dreams of a 'new language of desire' it is somehow imagined that the eyes themselves have a gender specificity, but here there is a recognition that even if it is accepted that the gaze is masculine this does not necessarily displace woman from the picture.

Firstly, there is the terrifying spectre of maternal sexual desire, that which cannot be spoken if the 'order of the familial' is to be maintained, and secondly woman's *heterosexual* desire, which is spoken in the depiction of femininity.

(This is to call all sexual desire in which woman is the object, *heterosexual* — regardless of the sex of the *subject*; similarly, all sexual desire in which a man is the object may be called *homosexual* even if, as is perhaps most often the case, a woman is the *subject* of the desire.)

The advantage of this designation is, very simply, that it assumes an active

subject position for women — even if that subjectivity is called 'masculine', which is the usual convention — and a passive object position for men — that which is usually called 'feminine'. This designation also conforms with a notion of the bisexuality of the drives. It has implications for a consideration of lesbian desire and also illuminates some of the contradictions surrounding women's attempts to depict men.)

At the same time *Carnal Knowledge* makes it possible to suggest that there are scenarios in which the so-called 'male spectator' does not enter the picture, scenarios which perhaps identify the source of the real problem of woman such that it is no longer a question of woman's difference but rather of her total indifference. □

1. Heinrich Wölfflin: *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, (Dover, 1950), p59.

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