

Thinking Difference Differently:

An Exploration of *l'écriture féminine*, Women's Art Practice and Postfeminism

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L'ÉCRITURE FÉMININE, translated as “feminine writing” or “women’s writing,” is a concept and textual practice that emerged in France around the early 1970s (first appearing in print in 1975 in “Le rire de la Méduse”).¹ Encompassing the work of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, it sought to challenge phallogentrism and open up alternative spaces in order to articulate sexual difference. Whilst the discourse of *l'écriture féminine* developed against the socio-political backdrop of change in France and is rooted very specifically in a French context, it was perhaps most notably adopted and appropriated by Anglo-American theorists and practitioners. In particular, *l'écriture féminine* was utilized by women and second-wave feminist artists invested in challenging hegemonic structures in language, culture, and also Western art. Indeed, many artists from the 1960s to the 1990s drew on the strategies and thinking of *l'écriture féminine* to make visible the female body and experience, and problematize dominant systems of representation that have marginalized the feminine and ‘woman.’

The appropriation of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva’s thinking by women and feminist artists, however, means that *l'écriture féminine* has evolved beyond its French roots and is underpinned by a myriad of tensions and problematics that have contributed to its being at a stasis perceived to be of little use to artists today. This article critically examines this view of and engagement with *l'écriture féminine* and seeks to reposition and reconceptualize it instead as a multi-layered discourse located within a particular cultural, linguistic, philosophical, and historical context. I argue for a new understanding of *l'écriture féminine* as an intertextual entity, to follow Kristeva, that encompasses the individual *œuvres* of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, yet at the

same time is grounded in shared thinking and is manifest in textual qualities that overlap and interweave with one another. Finally, in order to move away from the ways that second-wave feminist artists have engaged with *l'écriture féminine*, I examine the concept of postfeminism and contemporary debates about feminism to reframe *l'écriture féminine* in a current context and consider how elements of it may provide ways to think about difference differently.

***Vive l'imaginaire!*: possibilities of the feminine and signification**

Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva each analyze Western discourse as fundamentally phallogentric. They problematize Lacan's understanding of the feminine as occupying a position of lack in relation to the Phallus as the transcendental signifier of signification and confined to the pre-linguistic space of the Imaginary prior to the formation of the speaking subject in the Symbolic. Through their analyses of psychoanalysis and philosophy, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva each argue that the masculine and feminine are locked in binary opposition in which the masculine is positioned as the dominant term and the feminine is subordinated as the other.² For them, these dualist structures of unequal power dominate the formation of subjectivity and difference, whereby meaning is constituted only when one term is undermined in favour of the other.³ They problematize the view of the feminine as not being expressible on its own terms but rather only within the normative signifying and representational structures aligned with the Symbolic. Although Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva each envision different ways to challenge these structures, they all see a feminine writing practice as providing possibilities to articulate sexual difference in ways not based on hierarchical relations or power structures. As Cixous declares, feminine writing "is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures."⁴

Understood in relation to its French intellectual roots, *l'écriture féminine* is a complex and

multi-layered discourse that encompasses textual qualities such as circularity, plurality, heterogeneity, and flux. By its very nature, *l'écriture féminine* is difficult to define as it eludes the Symbolic dimension of language and representation. It has also been appropriated beyond the French context in which its meaning has evolved, thus making it an even more fluid term. To follow Kristeva, in considering *l'écriture féminine* one must be wary of replacing a rhetoric of genres with a “typology of texts; that is to define the specificity of different textual arrangements by placing them within the general text.”⁵ I therefore use the term *l'écriture féminine* here with caution to avoid reducing it to a label and obscuring its complexity (as has tended to be the case in the context of Anglo-American feminist theory and art. To reach an intertextual understanding of *l'écriture féminine*, it is imperative to note that whilst Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva were together invested in challenging phallogentrism and creating new textual economies to mobilise and articulate the feminine, they each had different strategies and thinking to do so.

Cixous was primarily concerned with creating alternative sites of representation by inscribing the feminine into discourse. Indeed, she notes that by censoring the body, speech too is censored, and one must write the self to allow “the immense resources of the unconscious to spring forth” (Cixous, *Laugh* 880). For her, such a practice of feminine writing can enable the subject to invent new languages. Cixous sought to articulate the feminine and reformulate existing structures through the inclusion of ‘other’ experiences. In doing so, she asserts that whereas the dialectical nature of a masculine textual economy implies the negation of one term and the enhancement of the other, feminine ways of giving based on exchange instead alter the conditions of language to create new practices. Whilst Lacan places the Imaginary and feminine *jouissance* beyond the Symbolic – and therefore outside language and signification – Cixous asserts that it is through feminine writing and poetic language that one can inscribe the unconscious associated with the Imaginary to create an alternative non-oppositional textual economy in the ‘between’ beyond dualistic logic.⁶

Whereas Cixous does draw on aspects of psychoanalysis, Irigaray “redefines the imaginary for her own purposes.”⁷ Through a critique of philosophy, she asserts that its dominance stems from the economy of the ‘Same’ where difference is eradicated in systems of self-representation that privilege the masculine.⁸ For her, these power structures are enacted through specularization as the self-reflecting organization of the subject that maintains the subordination of the feminine as ‘other.’ Irigaray argues instead for feminine writing or what she calls *parler-femme* (literally translating to “womanspeak”) as an alternative syntax that can represent the specificity of the feminine within the Symbolic, yet at the same time disrupt it. Whilst Cixous proposes non-oppositional difference that does not reproduce the system, Irigaray deliberately reproduces the structures of specularization. Rather than mimesis that maintains the feminine as other, she argues for productive mimesis. For her, *parler-femme* can alter the structuration of masculine syntax and open up sites of sexual difference through a ‘double syntax’ constructed through difference,⁹ enabling the feminine to come into play in language and be reinserted into discourse.

Unlike Cixous and Irigaray, Kristeva embraces and builds on Lacan’s understanding of the speaking subject as located within Symbolic language by developing the semiotic as a reworking of the Imaginary. Whilst Lacan asserts that the pre-linguistic drives and feminine *jouissance* of the Imaginary are not expressible or representable in the Symbolic, Kristeva proposes *signifiance* – as the continual oscillation between the semiotic and Symbolic – to enable the subject to connect to a “precise modality in the signifying process.”¹⁰ She conceptualizes the *chora* as a space of “uncertain and indeterminate articulation”¹¹ that gathers the endless flow and circulation of the instinctual drives that organize the subject before it enters the Symbolic. For Kristeva, poetic language can mobilize the *chora* through negativity and can allow the semiotic to destabilize the Symbolic even while recreating in order to create a new Symbolic, revealing the nature of all *signifiance* through its practice,¹² infinitely renewing the subject through the interplay of conscious and unconscious processes.

Towards an intertextual understanding of *l'écriture féminine*

Whilst there is indeed an overarching sense of *l'écriture féminine*, the concept remains underpinned by the textual practices and strategies of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva's individual *œuvres*. Yet at the same time, such feminine writing also manifests in textual qualities – evident in Cixous and Irigaray's own writing, as well as in the work of others (in particular for Kristeva) and their conceptualization of the feminine – that overlap and interweave with one another, which emerge through an intertextual reading of their work. It is not possible to present a comprehensive textual analysis of these qualities in this article, but in order to elucidate an intertextual understanding of *l'écriture féminine*, I would like to highlight a few here. The first of these qualities is that of a text flowing without fixed boundaries;¹³ like Kristeva's *chora* it incorporates fluidity and flux. Such writing is experimental and plays with language. Indeed, in "Volume-Fluidity," Irigaray uses an abundance of adjectives and an excess of punctuation to play with plurality, rhythm, and movement: "Everything, then, has to be rethought in terms of curve(s), helix(es), diagonal(s), spiral(s), roll(s), twirl(s), revolution(s), pirouette(s). Speculation whirls around faster and faster as it pierces, bores, drills into a volume that it supposed to be solid still."¹⁴ In a feminine text there are also moments of excess (Cixous, "Castration") where the feminine can be experienced fragmentarily, manifesting as rhythmic pulsional pressure and disruptions. The rhythm of poetic language 'irrupts' into the Symbolic, in which the semiotic operates in excess of signification to produce musical effects that destroy syntax.¹⁵ A feminine text is continuous, unending, and infinite. For Cixous, it has no limits but starts on "all sides at once."¹⁶ These qualities also resonate with Irigaray, who notes that the feminine sets off in all directions and is self-touching and auto-erotic, which when it returns sets off from elsewhere (Irigaray, *This Sex* 29). Feminine writing never ends, and it circulates within itself (Cixous, "Coming to Writing" 4). Textually, it is often presented as a continuum that encourages non-linear forms of reading,¹⁷

manifesting as multiple narratives that interweave and intersect with one another. It encompasses qualities of multiplicity, plurality, and heterogeneity in which the other is mobile and always in flux, in a process of weaving itself. It is a place where enunciation is never single or complete, but instead plural and shattered.

As we can see, *l'écriture féminine* is a complex, heterogeneous, and multifaceted concept. It can be understood as an alternative textual economy to articulate the feminine and challenge phallogentrism. Instead of being made up of rigid or prescribed elements, *l'écriture féminine* encompasses various textual qualities that are themselves shifting and ambiguous, resisting categorization. Like Cixous' metaphor of the rooted forest, *l'écriture féminine* can thus be conceived as a multidimensional space constituted in a process of becoming that simultaneously adapts to and moulds its environment.¹⁸ It might be understood as an intertextual entity, which, to follow Kristeva, refers to one or more systems of signs transposed into one another to articulate a "new representability" ("From One Identity to Another" 112). This idea also resonates with Cixous' notion of interchanges whereby feminine writing constitutes a weaving that creates relations between elements to form networks that in turn produce new pathways.¹⁹ In this way, *l'écriture féminine* can be understood as a system in which meaning is produced through the relations and interchanges between its components to allow for its structuration to come into being.

In considering *l'écriture féminine* as an intertextual entity, a plurality of meanings emerges from the interplay and interchanges within this sign-system, and thus signification becomes an open and unending process where meaning is malleable. This process is reminiscent of Derrida's notion of *différance*, in which the systematic play of differences within a text exceed and disturb conventional language and representation whereby something signifies by being deferred to another element as part of an economy of traces. The infinite play of differences, as understood through intertextuality, interchanges, and Derridean *différance* means that *l'écriture féminine* can

be conceived as a complex and multifaceted concept and practice comprising a plurality of components within this sign-system. The understanding of *l'écriture féminine* that I have discussed emerged in a very specific French intellectual context. However, as we will see, it was transposed into Anglo-American thought into an expanded discourse, in particular by women artists aligned with second-wave feminism. One of the consequences of this feminist engagement and interpretation was to homogenize *l'écriture féminine*, which has caused it to come to stasis

***L'écriture féminine* and feminist art practice**

L'écriture féminine has provided positive strategies for challenging phallogentrism and patriarchy, and for thinking about representing the 'feminine.'²⁰ Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva have together rethought the space of the Imaginary in order to reconceptualize the masculine and the feminine as non-oppositional entities that are equal and yet respected and celebrated in their difference.

Foremost, they have provided an analysis of the feminine as embedded in power structures in relation to language and representation, and they have provided textual strategies that open up sites of expression for the feminine, and for representing it, in ways not fashioned by phallogentrism. Whilst emerging from a French context, *l'écriture féminine* has also provided an array of strategies for Anglo-American women and feminist artists invested in challenging phallogentrism and unequal power structures in Western art history and has been "widely taken up by women's art practices."²¹ As Deepwell notes, the engagement with psychoanalysis in particular has been one of the most powerful influences on feminist art practice in the late 1980s.²² Indeed, feminist artists drawing on Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva's thinking sought to examine ways in which 'woman' could be represented in relation to Symbolic structures; these artists sought to dismantle them but not reject them altogether. Mary Kelly's seminal feminist artwork "Post-partum Document" (1973–1979), for example, forms an "analysis and visualization of the mother-child relationship"²³ specifically mapped out in relation to her infant son's formation as a speaking

subject and entry into the Symbolic. Taking the form of a series of ‘documents’ grouped in six developmental stages, from the visualization and analysis of fecal stains shown in soiled nappies to a ‘pre-writing’ alphabet more akin to letter-shaped scribbles, alongside Kelly’s own narrative, the work celebrates and makes visible female experience within the context of psychoanalysis yet beyond phallocentrism.

L’écriture féminine also provided ways to explore representations of the female and ‘feminine’ body as a challenge to patriarchy and dominant canons of Western art history. In particular, representational art practices in the form of body art, performance, film and, scripto-visual work challenged historical strategies of exclusion and privilege by reinserting and making visible the female body in culture through positive and celebratory images of women as a political and radical form of empowerment. *L’écriture féminine* provided a means to question Western systems of representation and dominant systems of looking as “phallogocentric” and the privileging of sight over the other senses within a phallogocentric logic. In particular, Irigaray’s notion of specularization has been argued to provide “the most powerful critique of the primacy of vision as a model for comprehending the female body” (Betterton, *An Intimate Distance* 13). This notion challenged historical ideas of the female body that situated women as passive objects of the male gaze and the projection of male desires.²⁴ Indeed, resonating with Irigaray’s concept of productive mimesis, Cindy Sherman challenges the specularization of women precisely by enacting this specularization by placing herself as the fetishized female body in her own photographs. Artists have also drawn on *l’écriture féminine* as a means to disrupt and rethink the idea of representation in visual art. For example, Alison Rowley’s paintings present the viewer with a familiar image such as a human figure, but, seen through dark masses of color, bodily elements are unrecognizable and ambiguous, which, according to Barrett, reveals the interplay between the Symbolic and the heterogeneous disruptive dimension of the semiotic.²⁵

In addition to critiquing existing representational regimes, *l'écriture féminine* allowed feminist artists to explore new symbologies of the female body²⁶ and alternative visual languages and syntax appropriate to 'woman.' Feminist artworks in the form of mixed-media, sculpture, and installation in particular (for example, Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, and Laura Godfrey-Isaacs) have explored material strategies to visualize what has been repressed in reference to qualities of tactility, fluidity, and excess and to embody and inscribe feminine and female experience, and evoke female morphology. Women painters such as Shirley Kaneda have also explored the idea of an 'alternative' feminine painting practice as a challenge to the perceived masculinist and patriarchal practice of modernist painting. Here, the textual qualities of *l'écriture féminine* have manifested in women's painting as 'feminine' characteristics such as fluidity, plurality, and circularity. Perhaps most prominently, the artist Nancy Spero claimed to develop *la peinture féminine* as the painterly equivalent of *l'écriture féminine*. Her installation "Let the Priests Tremble," for example, incorporates a plurality of naked and celebratory female figures that are overlaid to the point that the figures seem to overflow themselves.²⁷ Aesthetically, the work incorporates textual qualities of *l'écriture féminine* such as multiplicity, heterogeneity, and excess that disrupt and subvert the patriarchal gaze. Indeed, as Bird notes, Spero's work can be read as the inscription of the 'feminine' between the lines of patriarchal discourse.²⁸

At the edges of French discourse: mis/interpretations of *l'écriture féminine*

L'écriture féminine and Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva's thinking have provided huge possibilities for women and feminist artists. Nevertheless, the appropriation of *l'écriture féminine* by second-wave Anglo-American feminists in particular means that it has evolved beyond its French roots in ways that contribute to it being at a stasis. The term *l'écriture féminine* was first used in Cixous' text *Le rire de la méduse* (1975), which appeared in English translation in 1976, in what has been adopted and described as her "manifesto for *l'écriture féminine*" (Jones, "Writing the Body" 251).

However, Cixous shifted early on in her writing from using the term *l'écriture féminine* to “écriture au féminin,” meaning “writing in the feminine” or “writing said to be feminine.” Moreover, neither Irigaray nor Kristeva explicitly uses the term *l'écriture féminine* in their work. Rather, as Whitford notes in reference to Irigaray, it is a label that has been attached to her by others (38). Despite this, the term *l'écriture féminine* has become entrenched in discourse as a generic and homogenous marker that signifies a movement of “feminine writing.” As a result, it has often been reductively interpreted as “writing from the body,” and an unconscious overflowing of a ‘feminine’ libidinal economy to express female experience both by those aligned with Anglo-American feminism and those who sought to critique it. Moreover, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva are often reduced collectively to a group²⁹ labelled generically under the banner of “French Feminism.”³⁰ As a result, *l'écriture féminine* has evolved as a generalized and simplified term in which its intertextual potential and socio-cultural specificity have become lost. This reduction has occurred for two reasons. First, this so-called “French feminism” is rooted philosophically and theoretically in language and writing and is centred on sexual difference, the feminine, non-oppositional thinking, and challenging phallogentrism. These aspects of “French feminism” distinguish it from Anglo-American second-wave feminism, which is primarily concerned with challenging patriarchy in a political fight for equality between men and women yet the two have become conflated with one another. Second, there is also a distinction between French “French Feminism” and what Claire Goldberg Moses calls a “Made in America” French Feminism. However, American constructions of French feminism have been rejected by feminist thought emerging in France for sharing masculine power structures.³¹ Through its appropriation and interpretation beyond its French context, *l'écriture féminine* has thus tended to be understood as a feminist pursuit reserved for women, which points to a number of problematics.

Foremost, *l'écriture féminine* has been misinterpreted in relation to gender due to translational tensions and inconsistencies. The French word “féminité” is used throughout Cixous,

Irigaray, and Kristeva's *œuvres* in reference to feminine writing. However, as Moi notes, in English "féminité" can mean "feminine," "female," "woman," "women" or "femaleness," depending on its context.³² The term also more broadly represents the feminine as a concept within the expansive discourse of *l'écriture féminine*. Consequently, problems arise in understanding *l'écriture féminine* not only because its meaning is polysemic, but also because it is sometimes detached from the feminine as rooted in linguistics and psychoanalysis in its French context. In English translations, the multiple possible meanings of the feminine (and femininity) are often used interchangeably and are most often interpreted in terms of gender resulting in the misconception of *l'écriture féminine* as encompassing women's writing. For example, Joyce asserts that

We have heard for years about writing on the body and *l'écriture féminine*, about how the way a woman writes is different than the way a man writes [...]. Is there a quantifiable difference between men's and women's writing? Something about the number of adjectives?³³

Both Cixous and Kristeva locate *l'écriture féminine* in the pre-linguistic Imaginary (and semiotic) as a non-gendered space before sexual identity. For them, it is a space that has no special relation to women, and they both cite male writers and painters as utilising *l'écriture féminine* (for example, James Joyce, Jean Genet, Stéphane Mallarmé, Rembrandt). For Irigaray, however, the Imaginary bears the marks of the female sexual body (Betterton, 93), and she locates *parler-femme* in relation to female morphology and libidinal desires. Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva all criticize any fixed definition of 'woman,' and Irigaray herself notes that to claim that the 'feminine' can be expressed as a concept allows oneself to be "caught up in a system of 'masculine' representations, in which women are trapped in a system of meaning" (*This Sex* 122).

Moreover, Kristeva's suspicion of identity leads her to reject any notion of woman or the feminine as a rigid construct, and she specifically rejects any possibility of *l'écriture féminine* being inherently female. As Moi argues, if "femininity" does have a definition in Kristevan terms, it is that which is marginalized by the patriarchal Symbolic order (*Sexual/Textual* 166). Joyce's misinterpretation here is representative of how *l'écriture féminine* has been understood in a non-French context. Not only is this understanding contrary to *l'écriture féminine* in relation to its socio-cultural and historical context, but it risks charges of universalism and essentialism. Moreover, this understanding contributes to the view of *l'écriture féminine* as having limited use today.

These misinterpretations have informed how feminist artists have engaged with *l'écriture féminine*. As a result, many artists who drew on *l'écriture féminine* interpreted the feminine in terms of gender, maintaining a universal construct of women and ignoring the feminine in linguistic and psychoanalytical terms. Artistic investigations into *l'écriture féminine* in particular have demonstrated limited theoretical understandings that have simplified and misinterpreted it in feminist art practice. Indeed, Nancy Spero sought to create *la peinture féminine* as an exploration of "the *jouissance* of the female body."³⁴ However, she elaborates on *jouissance* as simply celebrating the 'joy' of women as active subjects and not passive objects, not acknowledging the bodily and psychic pleasures that are generated in the pre-linguistic. Not only does she define *jouissance* simplistically, but she defines *la peinture féminine* in terms of gender, both being misinterpretations of *l'écriture féminine*. Moreover, whilst non-oppositional thinking is a key feature of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva's feminine writing, Spero locates women as "active" subjects in opposition to men, which is simply to reverse power structures embedded in the man/woman binary. To follow Tickner, her *peinture féminine* is fundamentally paradoxical as it both asserts and undermines sexual difference.³⁵

The textual qualities of *l'écriture féminine* have been literally and metaphorically translated by some women artists into painting. Indeed, such “feminine” painting has been argued to incorporate “fragile” elements such as swirls³⁶ and motifs linked to a “female sensibility” inherent in circles, domes, eggs, spheres, and biomorphic shapes.³⁷ Moreover, *l'écriture féminine* has been positioned in opposition to “masculine” painting taken to be geometric, objective, uniform, and controlled,³⁸ and the masculinist identity of the Modernist male artist, which is stereotyped as “aggressive” and “virile.” The works of these women artists and their descriptions have simplistically translated the textual qualities and thinking of *l'écriture féminine* into paint and painting. Not only do they reduce the feminine to a visual aesthetic, which can be seen as essentialist and universalist, but the feminine is positioned in opposition to the masculine and maintains binary thinking, which is precisely what Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva sought to challenge. Artists also explored the inscription and embodiment of the feminine and female experience through qualities of tactility, excess, and fluidity manifest in the material properties of paint as oozing, overflowing, and reminiscent of the corporeal body. Such artwork can be seen to literally represent the feminine literally. However, it is contrary to the central aim of *l'écriture féminine* (and in particular Kristeva’s thinking) to explore the feminine as a means of production through language and the signifying process rather than through representation as bound up with the Symbolic.

(Re)interpreting *l'écriture féminine* through the lens of postfeminism

Whilst engagement with *l'écriture féminine* has indeed provided possibilities for feminist and women artists, particularly those aligned with Anglo-American second-wave feminism, it was underpinned at the same time by a number of tensions. These tensions resulted from a disjuncture between French and Anglo-American thinking, and between the feminine and feminism.

Approaching *l'écriture féminine* as an intertextual entity marked by its socio-political and cultural

roots enables it to be understood as a historical concept and practice that, when it emerged in the late 1970s, was instrumental in creating change. This approach celebrates and makes visible *l'écriture féminine* as a complex and multi-layered entity not marked or fashioned by its various mis/interpretations. At the same time, it is important to understand the ways in which *l'écriture féminine* has been adopted and appropriated, and to acknowledge that whilst it has evolved from its initial thinking, it is part of an expanded discourse in a non-French context.

Thinking regarding art practice and culture, as well as painting, feminism, and the feminine, has inevitably evolved since Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva's initial development of *l'écriture féminine*, and it continues to do so. Indeed, Ettinger's matrixial theory of trans-subjectivity reconceptualizes the Lacanian Symbolic, and the discourse of Queer Theory offers new understandings of subjectivity and identity. Butler also provides a useful critique of feminism in which she problematizes definitions of the term "woman" as universal and fixed and implications that there is a normative way to be gendered as a woman.³⁹ Instead she argues for a rethinking of the sign "woman" as open-ended and in process, constituted through performative acts⁴⁰ rather than in a rigid ontology, as the foundation of feminist politics in order for power structures to be reconceptualized and move beyond any binary distinction between sex and gender. Whilst *l'écriture féminine* was important in its initial context in challenging phallogentrism (and indeed in arguing for "woman" as unfixed), more recent thinking provides more sophisticated ways of thinking about difference. Instead of reconceptualizing *l'écriture féminine* in a current context to develop a new contemporary iteration of it as a coherent entity or rejecting it altogether, it can best be understood as an historical concept, certain elements of which can inform contemporary thinking concerning difference.

Many of the misinterpretations of *l'écriture féminine* arise from the ways in which those aligned with second-wave Anglo-American feminism have engaged with it, especially regarding the tension between the feminine (and difference) and feminism. How, then, might we conceive

difference differently in a current context and move on from these tensions? One way is to interrogate the notion of postfeminism and contemporary debates about feminism. There is little agreement about what the term postfeminism means, a term that does not have a single or stable meaning, which is manifest in the different variations of the term itself, such as “post-feminism,” “postfeminism,” and “post feminism.” The term is often met with hostility by those who identify as feminist, largely because the prefix “post” is most often interpreted as implying an era after feminism and thus as marking the end of feminism. For others, instead of being beyond feminism, postfeminism denotes a break in feminism and a move from what has been called second-wave feminism to contemporary (or for some, third-wave) feminism. Indeed, to follow Brooks, “post feminism is not against feminism, it’s about feminism today.”⁴¹ Postfeminism has also been seen as a political position, and as a discourse it is very much entrenched in challenging ideologies of neo-liberalism and consumer culture. In an academic context, postfeminism is largely located within Media and Cultural Studies programs, where aesthetic practice has almost exclusively been considered in terms of television, film, and popular culture, alongside the literary and theoretical examinations of gender politics. I would suggest that the waves of feminism can be perceived as generational movements of feminisms that form part of a continuum. Whilst postfeminism might indeed be a reaction to the contradictions and absences of second-wave feminism, it is essential for us to celebrate its strengths and acknowledge its weaknesses, viewing it as marked by ideals specific to their time to continually question what feminism may mean today.

Approaching postfeminism as a new form of feminism underpinned by plural histories allows us to celebrate progression without undermining it. Whilst challenges of a political nature are inevitably still pertinent, postfeminism can be expanded beyond the political per se to a realm of criticality conceptually encompassing a multiplicity of concerns. Indeed, the space of second-wave feminism – at least in art practice – was predominantly a white heteronormative space that discussed universal categories such as ‘gender.’ However, the binary distinctions that it privileged,

such as gender as man/woman or sexuality as straight/gay, no longer seem appropriate in an age of Butler and Queer Theory, and where “trans” and “intersex” identities are recognized. In today’s context, there is a potential for postfeminism to encompass sexual difference – and indeed *différance* – as developed from *l’écriture féminine* but in which difference is intersectional and extends to race, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity, for example. Postfeminism’s resistance to any fixed meaning through what Adriaens calls a contradictory, pluralistic discourse⁴² can in fact be utilised as a strength, affording multiple and more nuanced possible feminisms, rather than a fixed homogenous understanding of feminism that may contribute to its own orthodoxy or hegemony. Indeed, as Murray argues, such a broad-based pluralistic definition of postfeminism addresses the demands of marginalized cultures to create a non-hegemonic feminism capable of shaping multiple discourses and subjects.⁴³

Such a conceptualization aligns closely with the heterogeneity, mobility, and multi-layered nature of *l’écriture féminine* acknowledging its French historical and intellectual roots and its intertextual potential as a complex system possessing a “new representability,” to follow Kristeva. In such a view, postfeminism is not set up in opposition to feminism but enables a critical entanglement of feminine and feminist to envisage a contemporary form of feminism that moves on from the historical tensions between feminine/feminist. In the context of art practice, this view also has the potential to enable a rethinking of the problematics encountered in previous engagements with *l’écriture féminine* (marked, for instance, by binary thinking), by opening up a critical space beyond the power structures of feminist art practice itself, expanding instead to encompass difference (and indeed perhaps *différance*). Utilizing postfeminism as a lens here is not one-directional but in fact multidimensional and prismatic; postfeminism can enhance ways of seeing *l’écriture féminine*, but in fact *l’écriture féminine* can simultaneously enhance our understanding of postfeminism, what it may possibly be, and how to think difference differently.

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Notes

- 1 Hélène Cixous, “Le rire de la Méduse,” *L’Arc*, 61 (1975): 39-54.
- 2 Elizabeth Grosz, “Feminist Theory and the Politics of Art,” (1988), in *Dissonance, Feminism and the Arts 1970–90*, Catriona Moore, ed. (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 139–53.
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