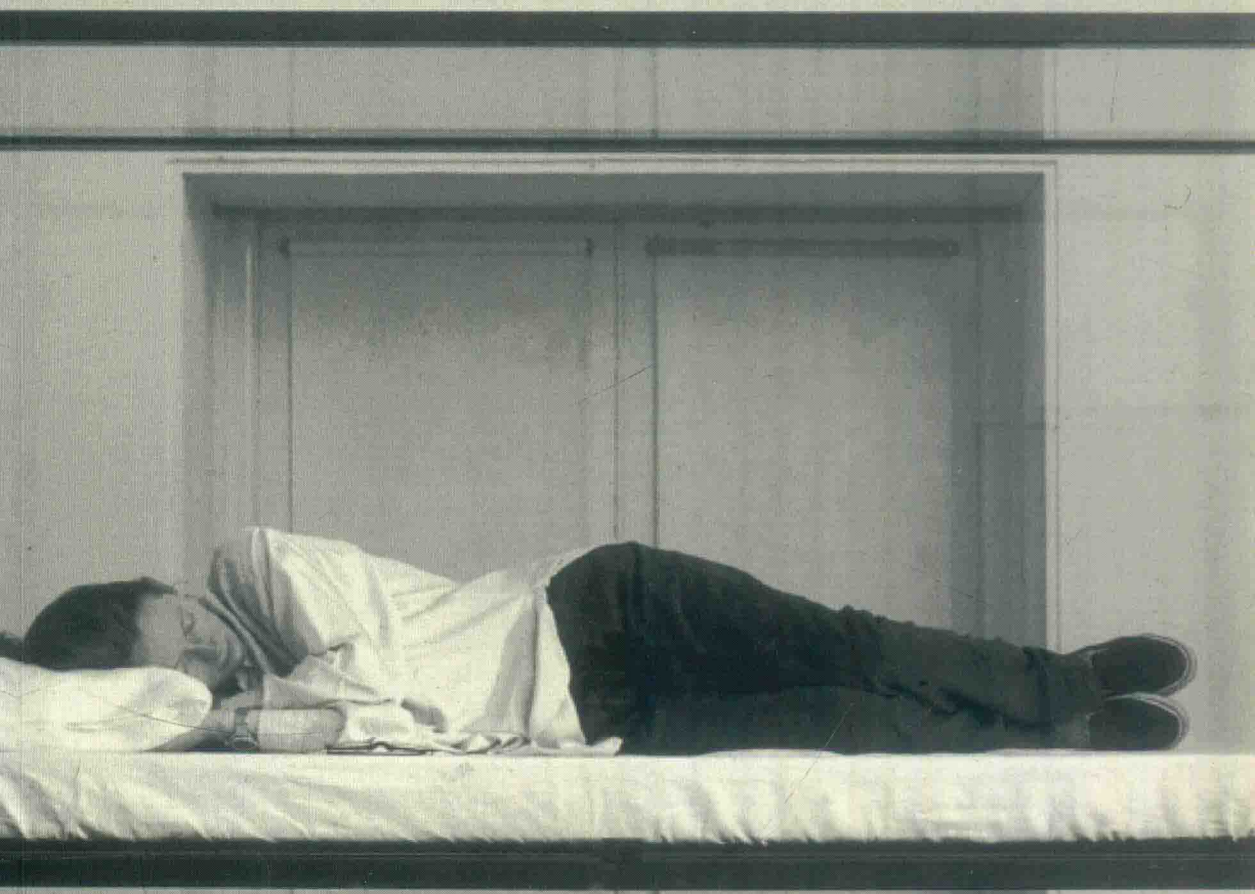
DIFFERENCE AND EXCESS IN CONTEMPORARY ART

THE VISIBILITY OF WOMEN'S PRACTICE

EDITED BY GILL PERRY



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First published as Volume 26, number 3 of *Art History*

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

First published 2004 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd
5 2011

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-1202-4
ISBN-10: 1-4051-1202-6

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set by Macmillan, India
Printed and bound in Singapore
by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

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Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art

This book is dedicated to the memory of Lorna Healy, who died of cancer on 8 September 2002. At the time of her death, Healy was writing an essay for this collection on the work of Hannah Starkey, and continually expressed support and enthusiasm for the project. Sadly, she was unable to complete the piece and her contribution will be sorely missed. Born in Ireland in 1970, she will be remembered for her imaginative and energetic teaching at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, Crawford College, Cork, and the Open University. In 1998 she joined the education department at Tate Britain, where she developed lively new programmes in unexplored areas of British visual culture. Many of her articles and reviews for art magazines and other publications (including *CIRCA*) addressed issues around art, feminism and popular culture. For example, in the year before her death she completed an essay on pop cultural strategies in Tracey Emin's work, 'We Love You, Tracey', now published in *The Art of Tracey Emin* (edited by Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend, London, 2002), which makes an important contribution to the study of contemporary video work. As editor, I would also like to express a strong personal sense of loss for a clever, combative, witty and engaging friend and colleague, who had so much to contribute.

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Fionna Barber is Senior Lecturer in Art History at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is currently working on a study of nation, gender and modernity in Irish art and culture (to be published by Reaktion Books).

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Gill Perry is Senior Lecturer in Art History at the Open University. She has published books, articles and edited collections on eighteenth century British art and twentieth-century European art, including *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (1995), and *Gender and Art* (1999). She is currently writing books on eighteenth-century representations of the actress (*Spectacular Flirtations*) and on contemporary women's practice in Britain.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the generosity of many artists, dealers and collectors who have kindly lent reproductions and/or given permission for works to be reproduced. They include: Rachel Whiteread, Artangel, Martha Rosler, Gillian Wearing, Maud Sulter, Minerva Cuevas, Sutapa Biswas, Maureen Paley at Interim Art, Cornelia Parker, the Frith Street Gallery, Alice Maher, Christine Borland, the Lisson Gallery, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Kara Walker, Cady Noland, Mona Hatoum, Jay Jopling/the White Cube Gallery, Sarah Lucas, Lubaina Himid, Sadie Coles Gallery, Public Art Fund NY, Brent Sikkema Gallery NY, Margaret Morgan and Peter Fleissig.

We are immensely grateful to the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London, for providing financial assistance to cover the cost of reproductions. Special thanks must also go to the Open University secretaries Shirley Parsons and Debbie Williams, who helped to format and correct drafts of the manuscript, to Sarah Sears for her skilful copy-editing, and to all those at Blackwells who enabled and supported the production. And we are especially indebted to Deborah Cherry for her enthusiasm for this project and her invaluable support.

1.1 Rachel Whiteread, *House*, Demolition, 11 January 1994. Reproduced courtesy of Artangel, London. Photo: Stephen White.

CONTENTS

1

Introduction: Visibility, Difference and Excess

Gill Perry

'Difference is far more entangled and complex than we like to admit.'
M. Catherine de Zegher (1995)[1]

Visibility

On 23 November 1993 two seemingly incompatible decisions were made in different parts of London. Bow Neighbourhood Councillors voted to demolish *House*, Rachel Whiteread's cast of the interior of a condemned house on Grove Road in the East End of London (plate 1.1). Meanwhile, at the Tate Gallery, Millbank, the jurors of the annual art competition, the Turner Prize, voted to give Whiteread the award, partly as an acknowledgement of the artistic value of *House*. Whiteread was the first woman to win the Turner Prize (established in 1984) and during the mid-1990s she rapidly became one of the most 'visible' of the so-called yBas (young British artists). The social, political and aesthetic ramifications of the production of *House* attracted widespread debate in national broadsheets and the local press, and concentrated public attention on the controversies at the heart of a 'new' British art.[2] Apart from the repeated refrain of 'but is it art?' in the columns of the broadsheets, the local press focused on issues of housing policies and local housing shortages, questioning the appropriateness of the cost (£50,000) of the work, which was commissioned and supported by the pioneering arts charity Artangel. Many art world figures and institutions rallied in defence of *House*, citing its innovative status as a site-specific installation which evoked memories – and revealed visible traces – of domestic lives and deaths (plate 1.2). Even within the various constituencies supposedly pitted against each other, there were differences of opinion. Local councillors and inhabitants of neighbouring houses were divided on the issue, and the decision to demolish the work (rather than extend its life for a limited period) was taken by a casting vote of one (plate 1.3).[3] As James Lingwood has suggested, '*House* laid bare the limits of language and expectations which afflict the contentious arena of public art.'[4] Unlike more conventional forms of memorial, it was unclear what values or associations the work was seeking to promote. Such confusions about meaning and value are now seen as critical signifiers of the controversial status of recent British art.

1.2 Rachel Whiteread, *House*, view from Grove Road, 1993. Reproduced courtesy of Artangel, London. Photo: John Davies.

However, within these debates, the gender of the artist and her visibility as a woman working in a sculptural medium previously dominated by men[5] have figured as less prominent concerns. The gendered resonances of domestic iconography have already engaged the interest of some scholars of Whiteread's work[6] (and will be explored further in Sue Malvern's essay 'Antibodies' on Whiteread's *Water Tower*). But there is also much contextual and analytical work still to be done around issues of visibility, strategies of self-narration, identity and the possible relationships between (feminist) theory and practice in the work of Whiteread and her contemporaries. This collection of essays and interviews seeks to advance such concerns through diverse encounters with the role of 'difference' within the practice of selected women artists.

1.3 Rachel Whiteread, *House*, Demolition, 11 January 1994. Reproduced courtesy of Artangel, London. Photo: Stephen White.

Recognition of the complexities and 'entanglements' which underpin any notion of 'difference' in visual representation has directly informed this project. Over recent years, concepts of difference (as the gendered, the sexual and the racial 'Other') have been energetically explored in feminist theory and practice in the pursuit of new and reworked aesthetic languages. Binary oppositions of female/male, feminine/masculine, culture/nature, white/black have been both exploded and reconstituted within some forms of contemporary art (by women and men), influenced by ideas scavenged from deconstructionism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, Marxism, anthropology, philosophy and post-colonial theory. Twenty years ago Craig Owens famously proclaimed the importance of issues of sexual difference within a postmodern critique of representation, citing the work of several women as key figures in this expanding discourse.[7] Drawing on various strands of postmodern theory, Owens explored the work of artists who were forging various alliances with feminist theory. With reference to the work of, for example, Martha Rosler, Mary Kelly, Sherry Levine, Dara Birnbaum, Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger in America, he asserted the contemporary cultural and aesthetic relevance of different forms of postmodern feminist practice. He argued that such women 'had begun the long overdue process of deconstructing femininity', by exploring not so much what representation says about women, as what 'representation *does* to women'.[8]

Twenty years on, the agenda has become more complex and fragmented. The evolving relationships between feminist theory and artistic practice now appear more troubled and 'entangled' than Owens's influential essay led us to believe, especially when we shift our focus to include the wide range of work produced by British and European women artists over the past two decades. However, this collection has been conceived and produced in the belief that these sometimes difficult relationships, and the debates which they have nurtured, have enriched and enabled a wide diversity of practices by women artists, some of whom (unlike many of Owens's protagonists) do not directly identify themselves either as feminists or as theoretically engaged.

Owens was concerned with issues of visibility. He noted the extent to which theories of postmodernism had tended to neglect or ignore the 'presence of an insistent feminist voice'[9] and the resulting absence of discussions of sexual difference. An important aspect of contemporary practice was thus (according to his argument) rendered invisible, or marginalized. Another concern with issues of visibility and invisibility has also been located within feminist strategies of deconstruction in which artists such as Rosler (whose work *The Bowery* is juxtaposed with Gillian Wearing's *Drunk* in David Hopkins's essay 'Drunkenness') or Kruger have sought to reveal the hidden social, cultural and sexual agendas within the visual and textual imagery of the modern mass media. Writing of these interests in the early 1980s, Owens was prompted to ask 'what does it mean to claim that these artists render the invisible visible, especially in a culture in which visibility is always on the side of the male, invisibility on the side of the female?'[10] Since the early 1980s such questions have resonated within the discourse on gender and 'women's art', and recent developments within feminist art practice and theory have encouraged explorations of the cultural, psychic, aesthetic and curatorial mechanisms of in/visibility.[11]

Catherine de Zegher's groundbreaking exhibition and catalogue of 1995–6, *Inside the Visible: an elliptical traverse of 20th century art in, of, and from the feminine*, engaged directly with these concerns. Through the exhibition of work by thirty-seven women artists from around the world, from the 1930s to the (then) present day, the curators sought not to produce a survey of women's art, but rather to address 'hidden themes' in contemporary art. The show combined the work of well-known artists with that of relatively 'invisible' figures, encouraging its audience to reflect on overlapping themes of gender and sexuality, the intersection of ethnic, class and sexual identities, the relationship between viewer and art work and the complex structures of visual languages.

It could be argued that many of these themes are no longer 'hidden' or marginal, that they are increasingly visible within the cultural and intellectual discourse which surrounds the production of contemporary art during the early years of the twenty-first century. That said, this book has been produced in the belief that some of the concerns and explorations which underpinned the intellectual and curatorial project of *Inside the Visible* are still relevant to a study of contemporary practice by women. In her introduction to the exhibition catalogue de Zegher wrote: 'It may seem paradoxical to argue against the separation of the world into exact oppositions and then confirm the binary system by selecting work on the basis of gender.' In defence of her selection she cited the need to show the partiality of historical structures, and 'to display the art of women because their roles as active agents of culture have too often been minimized'.[12] In this context, the project of making 'visible' involves the unveiling or rewriting of history in which language and visual images can be used to naturalize traditional patriarchal power relations.

This collection might deploy a similar defence for its gender bias, although (as I shall argue) the conditions of current practice reveal shifts in some of those power relations. Within our defence we should also stress our desire to avoid reductive or essentializing notions of 'women artists', while also acknowledging that the author is firmly back in the text. The complex relationship of the (woman) artist to her work – as narrator, observer, mediator, complicit autobiographical subject – is a theme which runs through many of the essays and interviews which follow. This project also emerges from the recognition of a further, perhaps paradoxical, development: the increasing visibility of the work of some women artists, especially (but not exclusively) in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Through the deployment of different analytical strategies and forms of interrogation and research, this collection tentatively sets out to explore how and why such visibility has emerged.

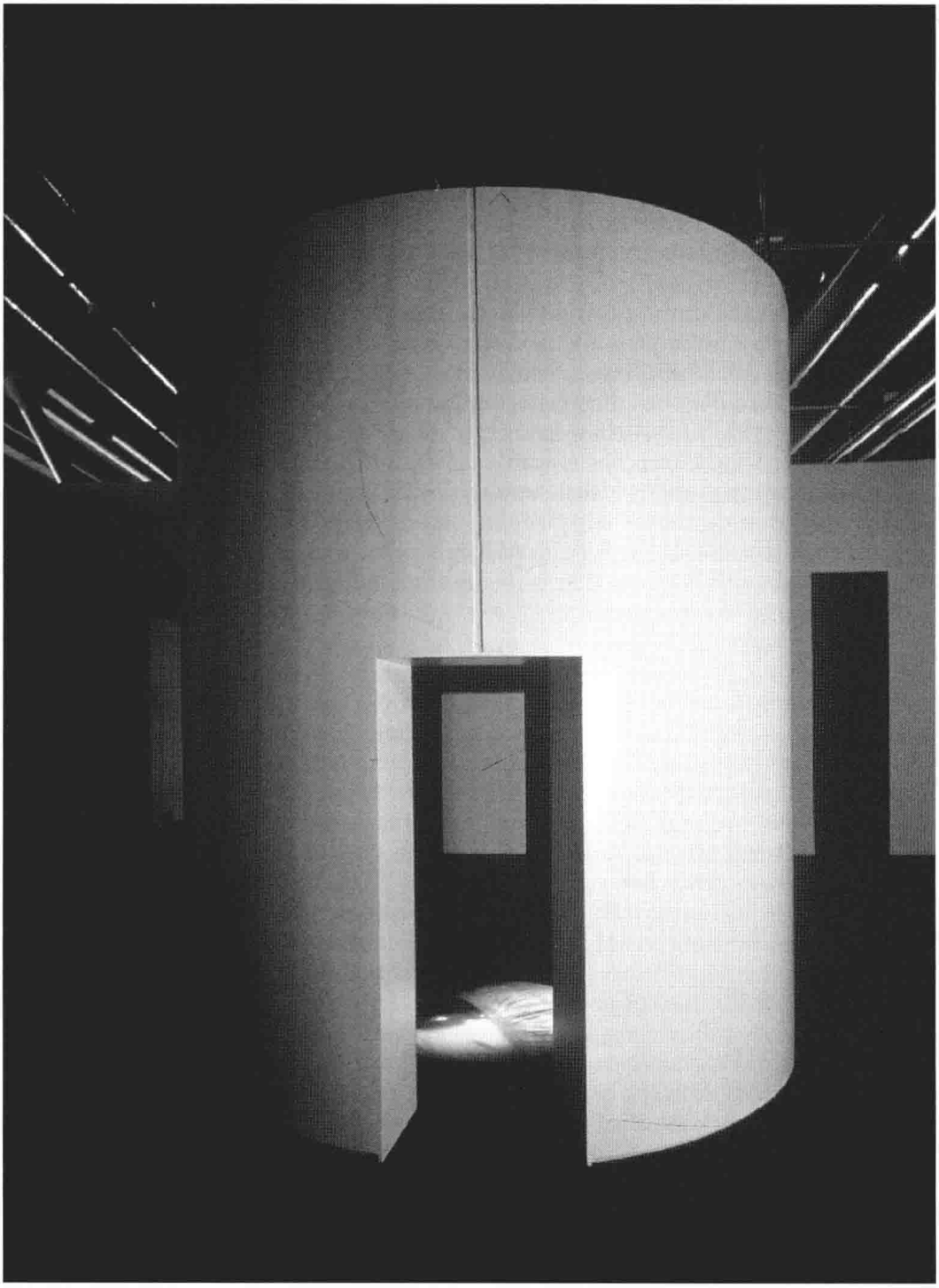
Work by women has featured prominently within recent debates about the status and 'meanings' of contemporary art practice in Britain, Europe and America. In Britain the rise to prominence of the so-called yBas, the much-trumpeted launch of Tate Modern at Bankside, London, the frenzy of publicity generated by the Turner Prize and the seemingly insatiable appetite of the press for art world stories which feature media-friendly artists (both women and men), have helped to focus critical attention on the work of several women. Artists such as Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas and Fiona Banner, whose work draws on popular culture and deploys readable strategies of irony and sexual

provocation, have been seen by some to be carrying the torch for a transgressive 'bad girl' art, indulging in an aesthetics of excess.[13] Gillian Wearing, Sam Taylor-Wood and the Lebanese-born artist Mona Hatoum, have also each been included at various times within – or on the margins of – the category of British 'bad girls', partly for their (albeit different but) irreverent engagements with themes of female sexuality through strategic and performative uses of video and photography (plate 1.4).[14]

In his influential account of the British art scene, Julian Stallabrass formulated the category of 'high art lite'[15] with which to articulate an art-historical and political critique of works by an increasingly successful group of male and female artists. The crude courting of media notoriety and celebrity status, the strategic deployment of popular culture, resistance to theory, political emptiness and juvenile superficiality have been identified in the work of yBas such as Emin and Lucas, Taylor-Wood and Wearing and critiqued by Stallabrass, among others. Strategies deployed by such artists have generated a fertile debate on the critical potential of representing excessive behaviour within art practices.[16] In what follows, the authors explore some of these readings of works by Emin, Wearing, Lucas and others, revealing some of the social and psychic meanings which can underpin an aesthetics of 'excess'. For example, in his essay 'Drunkenness', David Hopkins explores the performative aspects of Wearing's video *Drunk*, arguing that this is a self-reflexive work which provokes reflection on our obsessively confessional media culture.

Most of the other art practices featured in this book fit uncomfortably within the currently available geographical, national and art-historical categories. For example, the evocative sculptural installations by Rachel Whiteread (discussed in Malvern's essay on *The Water Tower*); the combination of sexual, art-historical and deconstructive references in works by Cornelia Parker (explored in Lisa Tickner's interview with the artist); and the potential for theoretical engagement in the obsessive installations of Christine Borland (featured in Marsha Meskimmon's essay 'Corporeal Theory') do not sit easily within the 'high art lite' frame.

Dorothy Rowe's essay on the performative strategies of the diasporic artist-led group moti-roti explores other issues of gendered and racial identity. The activities of this London-based group of male and fermale performers include techniques of parody, mimicry and excess, and further confuse the boundaries of both a 'British' art practice and a gendered category of 'women's art'. Similarly, Jane Beckett's essay on Lubaina Himid's *Plan B*, commissioned by Tate St Ives in 1998, focuses on the artist's use of narrative as a means of exploring diasporic and geographical identities in a series of paintings that plays with illusion and allusion. The inclusion of Fionna Barber's interview with the Irish artist Alice Maher is part of a deliberate and continuous editorial strategy to problematize cultural and geographical boundaries around ideas of 'Britishness' and its colonial histories. Furthermore, Michael Corris's interview with Robert Hobbs on the work of the American artist Kara Walker is included in an attempt to explore the representation of (gendered) difference within another national and ethnic context, outside the parochial preoccupations and debates which have circulated around concepts of 'Britishness'.



1.4 Mona Hatoum, *Corps étranger*, 1994. Video installation with cylindrical wooden structure, video projector, amplifier, four speakers, 350 × 300 × 300 cm. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London.

The texts in this collection have been combined to provoke a rethinking of some of those broad categories, critical and otherwise, which have been used to represent diverse forms of production in contemporary art, with a deliberate emphasis on Britain. Stallabrass himself emphasizes the inadequacies of labels such as Brit art or yBas as descriptive categories for a group of artists who live in Britain, but who are not all British.[17] He also registers an important characteristic of British art in the 1990s – the increasing prominence of women:

> The turn to the domestic is one factor that has favoured women artists who are strikingly more prominent in British art than they were ten years ago – and this development must count as one of the signal achievements of high art lite. A simple way of registering change is to look at the proportion of women in exhibitions that are meant to give an impression of the British art scene to those in other countries. While the previous wave of British art to come to prominence (the 'new sculpture') was dominated by males and by work that often made mystifying claims to its own spiritual significance, current exhibitions, such as *Real/Life* shown in various venues in Japan, contain art that is more domestically inclined, and a little more modest in its claims to cosmic import...[18]

Eight of the twelve artists in the *Real/Life* show in 1998 were women. This marks a significant shift, but such a high proportion of female exhibitors in a field previously dominated by established male 'heavyweights', such as Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Bill Woodrow, Richard Long and, more recently, Anish Kapoor and Anthony Gormley, is unusual. For example, the 'new' British sculpture show at the Whitechapel Gallery, London in 2002, *Early One Morning*, featured the work of three men and two women, a more typical gender balance for recent shows.[19] 'The turn to the domestic' and the iconography of the 'home' has undoubtedly featured prominently in the work of many contemporary women artists, apart from Whiteread. Although Stallabrass sees these interests as possible sites of media exploitation and trivialization (we might identify Emin's *My Bed* of 1999 as vulnerable to such appropriation), many of the texts which follow suggest that engagements with such themes can also reveal the artists' explorations of (female) subjectivities, identities and histories.

An underlying concern of this collection, then, is the need to acknowledge the complex play of issues of difference (in both the production and the viewing of art) in the formulation of our historical and theoretical categories. The critical undercurrents of high art lite have provided us with theoretical ammunition for the deconstruction of the media-friendly rhetoric of sensationalism. But the category may now be in danger both of feeding a seductive philistinism, and of homogenizing diverse and sometimes innovatory engagements with issues of identity, sexuality and aesthetic exploration.[20] It is hoped that the essays and interviews which follow will reveal possibilities and frameworks for re-categorizing and contextualizing such forms of practice by women.

In curatorial and critical terms both the 'yBa' and 'high art lite' categories have already been questioned. In 2000 a major exhibition, *British Art Show 5*, curated by Matthew Higgs, challenged pre-existing perceptions and identified a state of