



**VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS AND PERFORMATIVE TEXTS**

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**Editorial**

Is the work of feminism  
finished in 2010?

Can we finally put the  
F-word away?

Unfortunately, Susan Douglas' new book, *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism's Work is Done* (2010) provides ample examples to argue it is not. So do the six articles in *Visual Culture & Gender*, volume 5. Enlightenment suggests new knowledge—new ways of seeing; and the historical use of this term refers to valuing reason as authority in guiding epistemology. Donna Haraway (1988) revealed how enlightenment that is based in reasoned logic is situated knowledge, and that what is claimed as reason can be an epistemology of ignorance.<sup>1</sup> Feminist philosophers, such as Nancy Tuana and Susan Sullivan (2006), posit that “feminist epistemologies of ignorance were born out of the realization that we cannot fully understand the complex practices of knowledge production and the variety of features that account for why something is known, without also understanding the practices that account for not knowing” (p. vii).

Reasoned ignorance and enlightened sexism, is especially targeted toward girls and young women and seems to imply that since they have it all now, they don't need to worry about feminism anymore. They should spend their time and energy becoming sexier, which in a capitalist culture entails extensive shopping for continually revised youthful visual representations of themselves, and as many pharmaceutical and medical body alterations as they can afford. This trend is “good, old fashioned, grade-A sexism that reinforces good, old-fashioned, grade-A patriarchy” (Douglas, 2010, p. 10). The market concept of built-in obsolescence, in which something is outdated and useless in a short time, is the enlightened sexism of 2010. Marketed products for women make it clear that as each year of their life passes, there is a greater need for products to construct their worth through sexy youthful presentations of self.

The Feminist Frequency group produces short videos, i.e., performance text, posted on YouTube®, which enables commentary by viewers, to enlighten society on how sexism in visual representation continues in 2010. For example, they revisit the **Bechdel Test**, first formulated by cartoonist Alison Bechdel, in her comic strip *The Rule* (1985) in the comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*. The test for movies has three criteria: (a) it has to have at least two women in it, (b) who talk to each other, about

<sup>1</sup> Charles Mills first coined the term “epistemology of ignorance” in his 1997 book *The Racial Contract*.

(c) something besides a man. In December 2009, a look at the visual representation of Hollywood movies, shows an astonishing number of popular movies that can't pass these three criteria.<sup>2</sup> Women's complex and significant lives are underrepresented or non-existent in the film industry.

The performative texts that consider visual representation of gender in *Visual Culture & Gender (VCG)*, volume 5 (2010) look to roots, shoots, and brambles of feminism confronting sexist visual representations. In *Becoming Visible and Real: Images of Republican Women During the Spanish Civil War*, Dolores Martín Moruno (2010) shows us that media obfuscation of women's work isn't a new endeavor. She analyzes photographs taken during the Spanish Civil War, a social revolution between Fascist powers and Spanish Anarchist and Socialist workers, including both men and women. She looks at photographs of female soldiers, political leaders, nurses, and women working in the munitions factories and makes the case that these images illuminate the roots of Spanish Feminism.

Joshua Adair's article, "One must be ruthless in the cause of beauty": Beverley Nichols's and John Fowler's *Queer Domesticity in Mid-century England*, demonstrates how two very different men, Fowler and Nichols, played with queering the visual representation of British national identity through properties owned by the British National Trust, in popular magazines, and in novels consumed by both men and women of the time period.

The authors in *VCG*, volume 5, are shaping and informing us regarding what Norman Denzin (2010) refers to as "performance narratives" (p. 29); and Peter Dirksmeier and Ilse Helbrecht (2008) refer to as *after the performative turn in qualitative research*. Eisenhower's performative text in *VCG*, volume 5 is "a montage of abutting pieces that come together to create a whole" (p. 28). In this volume of *VCG*, Loran Marsan, Jennifer Motter, and Joshua Adair evoke agency and action in praxis, which are excellent examples of performative texts. Cher-ing (Marsan, 2010), camgirls (Motter, 2010), and popular educators (Lander & Sinner, 2010) perform theory, creating perFORMance.

Jennifer Eisenhower's (2010) *VCG* article, "*Bipolar Makes Me a*

*Bad Mother*": *A Performative Dialogue about Representations of Motherhood* invites readers into the dialogue between the author and television characters' discussions of bi-polar disorder. Eisenhower points to television's role in influencing her self-identity as a mother with bi-polar disorder. The mirrored surface that TV assumes in our homes reflects and suggests ways to understand, to cope, and to assess oneself in contrast to the perfect or imperfect persons represented on television.

Dorothy Lander and Anita Sinner's multimedia article, *Naming West Coast Women Artists as Popular Educators: An Appreciative Inquiry* takes readers on a journey to Vancouver Island and to the diverse art practices of Canadian popular educators involved in the women's movement. Their conversations with arts practitioners illuminate the art practices that constitute arts-based popular education and show how as feminists they continue to play with embodied enlightenment, and listen to intuitive and tacit knowledge.

Loran Marsan's *Cher-ing/Sharing Across Boundaries* reminds us about the performativity of gender. Looking at the multiple identities Cher has assumed and performed throughout her career, she questions the possibility of authentic identity.

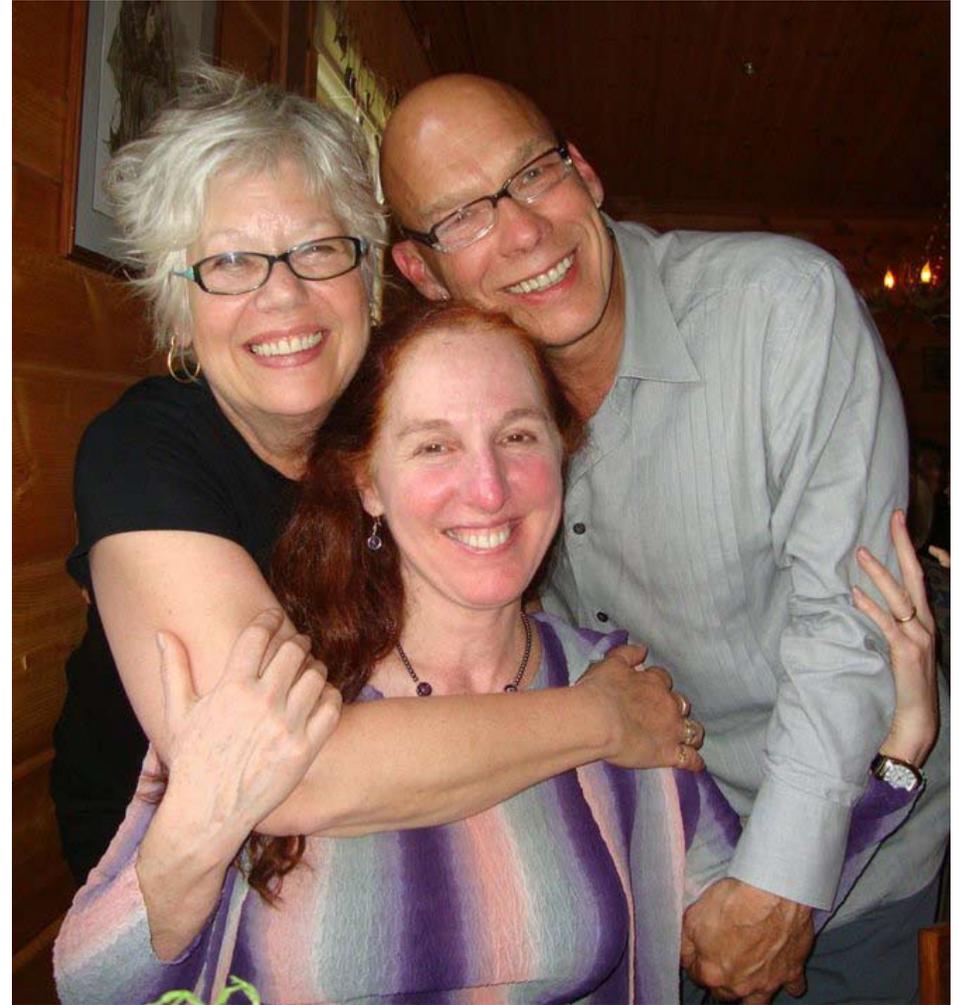
Jennifer L. Motter reviews Theresa M. Senft's (2008) book, *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks*, and brings us to a very contemporary way that enlightened sexism can infiltrate online social networks. Like the folks participating in reality shows, *camgirls* display themselves for online audiences. While this venue can be used for feminist consciousness-raising and indeed, the personal is often used for political ends, the implications of sharing personal experiences in public via webcam is open for debate.

So who are we now? Are we finished with feminist ideas? Have we moved to a gender-neutral culture where all people are valued for their kindness and contributions? Not likely. Meanings and identities are always produced through intertextual channels scanned and consumed. Identities and attitudes are never ever solid or complete. The rampant proliferation of cultural, social, and historical codes makes it inevitable that we will use them as mirrors with which to assess ourselves, our cultural networks, and the usefulness of feminist research and ideas. Serious feminist enlightenment that allows confrontation with Enlightened

2 See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLF6sAAMb4s>

Sexism comes only through reflective consideration of cultural mirrors. Unlike Alice (Carroll, 1871), we can't wander through the looking glass to get away from ourselves and our daily lives. Time can't run backward no matter how many jars of face cream or botox injections. In spite of the plethora of do-it-yourself self-improvement shows that are found on nearly every channel (and provide an ocean of data for contemporary feminist researchers to consider and deconstruct) our work is not yet done. According to Douglas (2010, p. 305),

“The time is  
long overdue  
for us  
to reclaim the F-word.”  
We agree.



Feminists joining forces: Deborah Smith-Shank, Karen Keifer-Boyd, and James Sanders III in Rovaniemi, Finland, June 2010.

We express our appreciation to Ju Chun Cheng, doctoral candidate in art education at the The Pennsylvania State University (PSU), for her work in the layout design of the articles in VCG, volume 5; and to PSU's School of Visual Art for providing assistantship funding to Ju Chun Cheng to do this work.

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**Karen Keifer-Boyd, Ph.D.**, is a professor of art education and affiliate of women's studies at The Pennsylvania State University. Her writings on feminist pedagogy, visual culture, cyberNet activism art pedagogy, action research, and identity speculative fiction are in more than 45 peer-reviewed research publications, and translated into several languages. She co-authored *InCITE*, *InSIGHT*, *InSITE* (NAEA, 2008), *Engaging Visual Culture* (Davis, 2007), co-edited *Real-World Readings in Art Education: Things Your Professors Never Told You* (Falmer, 2000), and served as editor of the *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* and guest editor for *Visual Arts Research*. She has presented at more than 50 international and national conferences, and at universities in Austria, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and Uganda. Her research focuses on feminist strategies for teaching critical and creative inquiry with dynamic/interactive technologies. She is president of the National Art Education Association Women's Caucus (2010-2012).

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