

Ersy Contogouris  
*Emma Hamilton and Late Eighteenth-Century European Art: Agency, Performance, and Representation*

New York/London: Routledge, 2018

186 pp. 14 colour & 70 b/w illus.

\$ 29.59 (paper) ISBN 9780367516062

\$ 124.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9780815374237

\$ 46.36 (epub) ISBN 9781351187916

Catherine M. Soussloff

In the history of European art and literature there is hardly a more paradigmatic example of the “problem” of the “woman artist” than Emma Hamilton (1765–1815), a fact indicated by the changes in her name over the course of her relatively short lifetime. In the European tradition, the artist was always understood to be male; the “woman artist” was a marked term and understood to be constructed differently in the discourse. In the Introduction, Contogouris makes something of the “difficulty” of Hamilton’s names and resolves to call her “Emma.” However, the variability of the names of female artists may be said to signify the instability of the figure of the “woman artist” in culture.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Emma Hamilton, and many others in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the name also signifies the precarity of the existence of the life of the individual female in a society where women were dependent on men and the institution of marriage for economic security and social standing. Thus, while the singular artist may indeed be a distinctive cultural figure from the early modern period to the present—one who, over the course of these eras, increasingly defines the meaning of art, the authority of its institutions and the power of its market—the figure of the “woman artist” and individual female artists de-stabilize these aspects of culture and society. Feminist art historians have generally agreed that the earliest historical example of such



destabilization occurs in the historiography of the seventeenth-century Italian artist Artemesia Gentileschi (1593–ca. 1656).<sup>2</sup>

Born Amy Lyon in England in 1765, and called Emma Hart beginning in 1782 until her marriage in 1791 to Sir William Hamilton, Lady or Dame Hamilton, as she came to be known, used and was used by the performativity of naming in order to assure a position in upper class and aristocratic society. She assumed the name of Emma when, at the age of sixteen, she became the mistress of Sir Harry Fetherstonhaugh. Soon after, Charles Greville insisted on naming her Mrs. Emma Hart when she came “under his protection.” With that name, he sent her to Naples in 1786, intending to make her the mistress of his widower uncle Sir William Hamilton, who eventually married her. However, “Emma,” as she is called by the author Ersy Contogouris, could not give any of these surnames to either of her two daughters. They were not hers to give: the first child, fathered by either Fetherstonhaugh or Greville, was called Emma Carew after her mother and a distant relative; the second, Horatia Nelson Thompson, was recognized by her father the naval hero Lord Nelson only on his deathbed. In the history of art, the individual subject known as the artist requires recognition so that the works by that person may be known, attributed, and collected. If the proliferation of names around the subject “Emma Hamilton” have consistently

confused and confounded interpreters of her performances and observers of the portraits of her by famous artists of the day, we should not be surprised.

As Contogouris argues in the Introduction, artistic mis-attributions and mis-recognitions proliferate in the literature on Hamilton, starting in her own lifetime. According to the author, these extended well beyond the usual key distinctions made in art history between the artist as subject and the work of art as object to include questions of “agency” in Hamilton’s role as model and muse, and the nature of her “attitudes” and dance performances. The many striking caricatures of Hamilton as dancer and model, discussed by Contogouris, exploit the fact that the artist embodied for others a mis-recognition that adhered in general to the woman artist as subject and in particular to the historical individual, Emma Hamilton. Caricatures affect the viewer through the deformation of resemblance to a person’s face or body taken to its furthest extreme of embodiment, which is what some viewers found in both Hamilton’s performances and in portraits of her.

In her book, Contogouris aims to rectify the misunderstandings that have circulated around Hamilton’s *oeuvre* for two centuries by re-reading the visual material against the prevailing literature, which has maintained an aesthetic of sexualized mis-recognition. Her intention should be read against the backdrop of a substantial art historical literature of the last three decades devoted to the feminist project of re-interpreting both female artists and the representation of women in the eighteenth century. The late Mary Sheriff’s publications on the representation of women in the *ancien régime* by Fragonard and in the years following the Revolution by other French artists, in particular Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, should be considered primary here. Sheriff understood that, in the case of the woman artist, the very malleability of the female artist-subject’s identity—what

Contogouris calls Hamilton's "multivalence"—projected onto the work in ways distinct from her male contemporaries.

In Chapter One, Contogouris traces the various identities found in Hamilton's art practices, and argues that she developed them with a self-awareness not usually found in women of her class. We cannot say, however, that Hamilton was unique in her manufacturing of identities, although she consistently manifested her individual manner based on the neo-classical ideal of female beauty fashionable at the time. Nor can it be alleged that Hamilton's purported energy and grace as both a dancer and socialite differed in these qualities from the self-representations of her contemporary Angelica Kauffman, depicted at the same time as a graceful painter and a socialite. None of the actions of these women or their works of art can be separated from their respective existences in the transactional economy of male-to-female power relations in the period.

Interestingly, Vigée-Lebrun portrayed Hamilton and witnessed her dancing. Contogouris erects an atmosphere of female competition or artistic rivalry around these representations, which she contrasts with the paintings by George Romney of Hamilton, which are interpreted as adorations of his "muse." Contogouris wisely seeks to complicate the muse term by endowing Hamilton with a certain degree of "agency" in her transactions as Romney's model, supported with biographical information concerning Romney's despair after her marriage and departure for Naples. In fact, there is enough evidence for Hamilton's performativity, and hence her agency, throughout her life, not only as a dancer of what were called, at the time "attitudes," but also as a sitter for portraits and allegories by Romney, Vigée-Lebrun, Kauffman, and others. The "performativity" inherent

in portraiture—a genre which Contogouris rightly asserts expanded in social and cultural importance starting at the end of the eighteenth century—has been theorized in art history since Alois Riegl's important 1902 work on seventeenth-century Dutch group portraiture.<sup>3</sup> Riegl expanded the sociality of portraiture to the psychology of the sitters and to their interrelationships as individualized representations with viewers. An expressive identification, or what has also been called an intersubjectivity, took place between the subject portrayed and those who viewed the portrait. If Riegl was correct, the artist orchestrated this intersubjectivity in portraiture through the presumed performance of his sitters for their intended audience. While Riegl's theorization of portraiture pertained to the group portrait in early modern Holland, his understanding of the genre as a whole and its development in later centuries, especially his own, relied on the expressivity of subjects and the affectivity of viewers. With her help, Romney could be said to have exploited these very aspects of the genre in his pictures of Hamilton, just as she exploited such interactions between subject and audience in the performance of "attitudes," which Contogouris astutely hypothesizes as somewhere between still-figure *tableaux vivants* and modern dance.

The second chapter follows Hamilton to Naples in 1786, where she encountered and conquered Sir William Hamilton, the British envoy to the Bourbon court, an amateur volcanologist and a famous collector of antiquities, who possibly sought in Hamilton an addition to his collection, another aspect of the transactional economy of her life as an artist. Here, Contogouris argues that the caricatures of Hamilton, by Gillray and others, formed her resolve to use her identity to her advantage, particularly in the invention of the performance mode called "attitudes," said by the author and others to be enactments of female stereotypes. The

mode, however, may be considered more complexly if one considers the performativity of stereotypes to be an activation of a type portrayed by the artist and recognized by the audience. Thus, Contogouris goes on to unpack the movements and transformations essential to Hamilton's "Attitude" performances around a concept of performativity dependant on the theorizations of Judith Butler, basing her interpretation on a re-reading of the available visual material.

By the end of the eighteenth century, and especially in the case of Hamilton, the question becomes: does the contingent female subject (Hamilton) perform differently for the female artist (Vigée-Lebrun, for example) than for the male artist (Romney, for example)? Further, if performance itself is the medium of the artist-sitter, as it was in the case of Hamilton's attitudes and tarantellas, the over-determination of the performativity inherent in portraiture deserves more interpretation than a recourse to the influence of the admittedly powerful sitter upon a presumed rival or a besotted painter. It is at this point that the instability of the term "woman artist" might be inserted into a situated and historiographical perspective. To have been a performance artist of any kind was not a common or usual role for women who aspired to aristocratic status, yet Hamilton persisted in dancing and in modelling. In these endeavors, according to Contogouris, she clearly sought to project herself as the central creative figure. With this figure, however, Hamilton also found the unstable category of "woman artist" formed not only according to her gender by also by her marital situations and her reliance on an aesthetics of beauty analogous to works of art in the neo-classical style. As Contogouris's book reveals, neither dances, attitudes, or portraits could be separated from her viewers' expressions of devotion to the institution of marriage and to the neo-classical style. The institution

and the style, therefore, supported the concept of the “woman artist” insofar as that figure served to exceptionalize sexual behaviour and metonymize the body in art.

Thus, as Contogouris’ book reveals, what the figure of Hamilton does for the historiography of art’s misrecognition of the woman artist is to maintain “the troubled relations between an artist’s life and work, between biography and art, fact and fiction, history and truth, document and truth,” asserted by Griselda Pollock.<sup>4</sup> Pollock’s feminist point of view on Artemisia Gentileschi cited here admits of two key points: in life, these “troubled relations” know no gender, but given the historical discourse surrounding women artists, we can say that they are acutely expressed in art history. In both art history and the patriarchal societies of early modern Europe, these “troubled relations” insist on the primacy of masculine desire in the representations of the woman artist and the interpretations of her art. Ascribing agency to someone who did not have it at the time only reveals the problem for what it was and is: a re-inscription of masculine desire onto the figure of the “woman artist.” Pollock concludes by suggesting that all interpretations of the woman artist construct her as “the sacrificial victim.” This is no doubt a pessimistic view, but also a realistic one with regard to Hamilton, especially concerning the story of her life after the death of Nelson. Although she does not say so, perhaps this is why Contogouris, in the last chapter of her book, turns to some more recent re-imaginings of Hamilton, where an artist with agency can indeed be found. Whether our view of the artistic contributions of Hamilton can be essentially transformed by more contemporary artists or not, the author’s turn presents an optimism not obtained otherwise in the thorough and scholarly study of the patriarchal desires of the past found here. ¶

Catherine M. Sousloff is Professor in the Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory at the University of British Columbia.  
—catherine.sousloff@ubc.ca

1. See my extensive discussion of this issue in regard to the filmmaker Maya Deren, “Maya Deren Herself,” in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 104–129.
2. See the essays and bibliography in *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*, ed. Mieke Bal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
3. Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999). See also Catherine M. Sousloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 25–56.
4. Griselda Pollock, “Feminist Dilemmas with the Art/Life Problem,” in *The Artemisia Files*, 169–206. My remarks here do very little justice to what I consider Pollock’s major intervention into the problem of the “woman artist.”

---

Natalie Loveless  
*How to Make Art at the End of the World:  
A Manifesto for Research-Creation*  
Durham: Duke University Press, 2019

176 pp. 12 b/w illus.  
\$23.95 (paper) ISBN 9781478004028

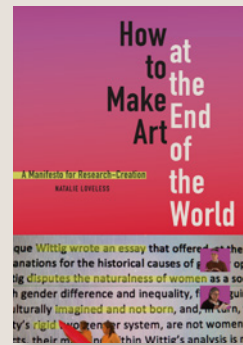
David Theodore

---

In this succinct book, Natalie Loveless explores the claim that art-making practices are well situated to challenge and change existing knowledge-making practices in the contemporary research university. As the title suggests, Loveless mobilizes her own interests and affections to respond to the “end of the world”: the looming environmental calamity of “petrocultural colonial capitalism” (99). These interests include Thomas King’s championing of Indigenous storytelling, Donna Haraway’s communal ethics of the non-human, and Jacques Lacan’s linguistic psychoanalysis. Exploring provocative links between the crafting of research

questions, stories, and ethics, Loveless thickens the theory of how art-based research-creation can mobilize “the project of re-thinking interdisciplinary practice and politics in the North American University today” (6).

The book is the fruition of an earlier piece published in RACAR in 2015 called “Towards a Manifesto of Research-Creation.” In that polemic, Loveless argued that art-making establishes a kind of ethics distinct from and better than the legalistic ethics overseen by university research ethics boards. In this new book, she shifts from that negative stance to embrace a positive exploration of erotic desire, conditional love, and, above all, care. The idea is that art is especially good at helping scholars imagine other worlds. Creating art is a way to bring



scholars into a resolutely interdisciplinary polity able to think research as love—in particular, love as passionate *eros* rather than as altruistic *agape*. She is convinced that an appropriate response to human-induced climate change and the political, social, and economic legacies of colonialism is to make art in the university. The result is indeed a manifesto of art-based research-creation as a progressive political force within the university.

It is a short book, 107 pages long, divided into four chapters, plus forty-three pages of notes and bibliography. The introduction, “Art in the Expanded Field,” sets research-creation in contemporary art history. In