

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

York College

2019

Making It New and Keeping It Old: Recasting Frameworks and Contexts in Georgia O’Keeffe Studies

Linda M. Grasso
CUNY York College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/yc_pubs/283

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Making It New and Keeping It Old: Recasting Frameworks and Contexts in Georgia O'Keeffe Studies

Tanya Barson, ed. *Georgia O'Keeffe* [exhibition catalogue, Tate Modern, London]. Millbank, UK: Tate Publishing, 2016. 266 pp.

Wanda M. Corn. *Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern* [exhibition catalogue, Brooklyn Museum, New York]. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum in association with DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2017. 318 pp.

Ellen E. Roberts, with the assistance of Samantha Niederman. *O'Keeffe, Stettheimer, Torr, Zorach: Women Modernists in New York* [exhibition catalogue, Norton Museum of Art, Florida; Portland Museum of Art, Maine]. West Palm Beach, FL: Norton Museum of Art, 2016. 160 pp.

Reviewed by Linda M. Grasso

Abstract: Three recent Georgia O'Keeffe exhibition catalogues devise new interpretative frameworks and situate O'Keeffe in new contexts that are especially relevant to American Studies scholars interested in visual culture, material culture, gender studies, reception studies, and modernism. One places O'Keeffe in the company of other white women making modernist art in the early decades of the twentieth century; another provides critical interpretations that acknowledge and reject previous views that were skewered by monolithic gender and sexual lenses; and a third moves O'Keeffe into popular culture domains such as fashion, consumerism, and interior design. Raising questions about how curators present and shape artists' legacies, as well as how they translate exhibitions into book form, these catalogues offer opportunities to explore new directions in O'Keeffe scholarship, such as an internationalizing trend and a turn to interdisciplinary American Studies methodologies.

Keywords: Georgia O'Keeffe, exhibition catalogue, gender, modernism, international

Résumé : Trois récents catalogues d'exposition de Georgia O'Keeffe imaginent de nouveaux cadres interprétatifs et situent O'Keeffe dans de nouveaux contextes, lesquels sont particulièrement pertinents pour les chercheurs en études américaines qui s'intéressent à la culture visuelle, à la culture matérielle, aux études de genre et au modernisme. Un des catalogues positionne O'Keeffe avec d'autres femmes blanches créant de l'art moderne dans les premières décennies du XX^e siècle; un autre fournit des interprétations critiques qui reconnaissent et rejettent les points de vue précédents, lesquels étaient biaisés par un concept monolithique des genres et des sexes; et le troisième déplace O'Keeffe dans des domaines culturels populaires, tels que la mode, le consumérisme et le design intérieur. En nous forçant à examiner la manière dont les conservateurs présentent et

forment l'héritage des artistes, ainsi que la manière dont ils traduisent les expositions en livre, ces catalogues offrent des occasions pour explorer de nouvelles directions de recherche sur l'art de O'Keeffe, notamment une tendance à internationaliser et un virage vers des méthodologies interdisciplinaires en études américaines.

Mots clés : Georgia O'Keeffe, catalogue d'exposition, sexes, modernisme, international

Exhibition catalogues are valuable primary sources: they ensure a record of artistic creation, and they evince how curators present artists and their work in a particular venue at a specific historical moment. They also create the illusion that an exhibition is timeless, existing in a perpetual present. It is hard to imagine today, but before Georgia O'Keeffe's 1970 Whitney Museum of American Art retrospective exhibition, there were virtually no catalogues of her shows that were anything like the three substantial, scholarly, and lavishly illustrated books I am discussing here. This is partly because it was not until the 1960s that inexpensive colour printing made it possible for these kinds of publications to function as decorative objects, souvenirs, and scholarly contributions. But it is also because O'Keeffe's art was not much studied before the resurgence of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, which helped to spur the massive body of scholarship that exists today. O'Keeffe liked the idea of the 1970 Whitney Museum of Art exhibition, curator Lloyd Goodrich recalled in a 1982 interview, because she was promised that the show would be accompanied by a catalogue, and up until that time, "there was nothing in print about her between hard covers" (qtd. in Castro 146).

Goodrich's claim is not entirely accurate, since O'Keeffe's work had been considered, albeit briefly, in a handful of scholarly books from the 1920s to the 1960s (Lynes, "Selected Bibliography"), and Daniel Catton Rich, another influential museum director and proponent of modern art, had written introductory essays for the catalogues of two earlier retrospective exhibitions, both of which he curated: one held in 1943 at the Art Institute of Chicago and another in 1960 at the Worcester Museum of Art. And, indeed, Rich's insights in the 1943 essay about the influence of modernist photography on O'Keeffe's "pictorial design" (21) and the "perfect consistency" (40) of her art have been subsequently explored at length by art historians. Nevertheless, Goodrich's comment is instructive: it makes clear that near the end of O'Keeffe's seven-decades-long career, the artist believed that her work had not gotten the professional recognition it deserved. Feminist scholars, such as biographer Laurie Lisle and art historians Barbara Buhler Lynes and Sarah Whitaker Peters, who researched, wrote, and published the first books that focused exclusively on O'Keeffe and her art in the 1980s and 1990s, sought to rectify this omission.

O'Keeffe, Stettheimer, Torr, Zorach: Women Modernists in New York; Georgia O'Keeffe; and Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern indicate how much has changed since the "dark ages condition of O'Keeffe studies" in the 1970s (Peters 7). All three books are

companion catalogues of large travelling exhibitions that were staged in museums inside and outside the United States, and all contain copious illustrations, scholarly commentary, information about exhibited works, notes, chronologies, and bibliographies. Additionally, *Georgia O'Keeffe* and *Living Modern* include ancillary material such as interviews, historical primary sources, and data about material objects. Offering new approaches to an iconic artist, these three books engage several areas of interest to American Studies scholars: visual culture, material culture, gender studies, reception studies, and modernism.

As records and artefacts, the books indicate how curators exert editorial power as shapers and interpreters of artists and their legacies. In keeping with its expansive reach, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, the catalogue of the Tate Modern Museum's retrospective exhibition, is an anthology that contains the voices of six art historians, the curator's among them, who examine the sweep and exuberance of the artist's lifetime of modernist art-making in multiple geographic locations. The curator in this instance thus functions as a co-ordinator, contributor, and compiler who shares the act of knowledge making. The other two books are single-authored studies that focus on a constellation of related themes from one scholar's perspective. *Women Modernists in New York* considers O'Keeffe's art alongside that of her lesser celebrated peers who were also working and exhibiting in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s; and *Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern* argues that O'Keeffe's sartorial self-fashioning and domestic aesthetic were essential forms of her modernist artistry. In these cases, the curator is the sole expert and guide.

Whether they do so collaboratively or singularly, all three curators situate O'Keeffe in new contexts: for Roberts in *Women Modernists*, this means placing O'Keeffe in the company of other white women making modernist art in the early decades of the twentieth century; for Barson in *Georgia O'Keeffe*, it means providing critical interpretations that acknowledge and reject previous views that were skewered by monolithic gender and sexual lenses; and for Corn in *Living Modern*, it means moving O'Keeffe into popular culture domains such as fashion, consumerism, and interior design. Seeing O'Keeffe in these new contexts affects what we think we know about her life and how we understand and appreciate her art.

Corn's thesis that O'Keeffe intentionally crafted a self-image that mirrored her modernist aesthetic of simple lines and monochromatic colours, and that she performed this image for photographers throughout her career, compels the greatest reassessment of the artist's responses to modernity and fame. O'Keeffe cared deeply about her celebrity, Corn shows, and she applied the same modernist principles to her clothing and living environments as she did to her art. What is distinctive about O'Keeffe's artistry, Corn argues, is her "amazing continuity" (22) in this practice over the course of her career. "One of O'Keeffe's greatest assets was her ability to aesthetically arrange forms in space, whether on the canvas as a painter, in her dressing and self-fashioning, or

in furnishing and decorating her homes,” Corn notes, underscoring O’Keeffe’s creativity in multiple domains (195). Consistently utilizing an “aesthetic of simplicity, distillation, and clarity” (11) in her clothing, houses, and daily living, O’Keeffe made everyday objects and activities forms of art.

Corn’s scholarship is stunning, and *Living Modern* is gorgeous to behold. Photographs of O’Keeffe, her art, clothing, houses, and contextual sources, such as advertisements and fashion models, are accompanied by analyses full of minute detail about fashion history, textiles, and clothing. This is American Studies scholarship at its best. Drawing from a multitude of sources and collapsing disciplinary boundaries, Corn’s perceptive readings of paintings coupled with an exploration of the ways in which “camera artists” photographed O’Keeffe and helped her perpetuate the celebrity image she favoured make *Living Modern* a model of innovative scholarship.

But Corn’s study and the other two books give us something more than insights and revelations about O’Keeffe and modernism. They also tell us a great deal about the current state of O’Keeffe scholarship. Two trends are clear: one is that art historians such as Roberts, Barson, and Corn are favouring an American Studies methodology that places subjects in unexpected arenas, draws from a multiplicity of disciplines, and considers a variety of sources, not just artistic mediums, as generative sites of study. Corn is the most explicit in naming this scholarly turn. In what reads like a manifesto in the concluding paragraph of *Living Modern*, she argues that scholars need to think broadly and creatively about O’Keeffe’s artistic significance. O’Keeffe “belongs not only in the history of twentieth-century art but in the history of women, costume, architecture, home décor, gardening, Southwestern culture, and photography,” she writes. “Future students may even give her a role in the history of pets, of food preparation, and of homeopathic medicine, all interests she pursued with similar passion and consistency” (283).

Ironically, however, at the same time that O’Keeffe scholarship is expanding into new domains, it continues to enshrine the artist as an exceptional exemplar, a phenomenon Griselda Pollock comments on when discussing an earlier era. Noting the unintended consequences of feminist recovery efforts in the 1970s, Pollock contends that artists such as O’Keeffe and Frida Kahlo achieved what she terms “false renown,” which perpetuated the erasure of other women artists who were also involved “in the shared making of a modern modernism (one that understands gender transformation as central to the modern)” (“Seeing O’Keeffe Seeing,” in *Georgia O’Keeffe* 104). In this regard, *Women Modernists in New York* makes an important intervention. Addressing O’Keeffe’s current “false renown” by including her alongside Marguerite Zorach, Florine Stettheimer, and Helen Torr, three artists in O’Keeffe’s orbit whose work is far less known, the exhibition and book insist that O’Keeffe was not alone, nor was she exceptional: her gendered struggles were common to other women of her cohort.

Neither the exhibitions *Women Modernists in New York* nor *Living Modern* left the United States, but the Tate Modern retrospective, the largest exhibition of the three, bypassed the United States entirely. That this exhibition, which commemorated O’Keeffe’s one-hundredth anniversary as an exhibiting artist, travelled to Vienna and Toronto after leaving London and did not come to a major US city, points to another trend in O’Keeffe scholarship: the internationalization of O’Keeffe and her work. The “Further Reading” section of *Georgia O’Keeffe* lists exhibition catalogues from shows in France (2015), Germany (2012), Ireland (2007), Switzerland (2004), and England (1993), suggesting that curators and scholars in Western Europe are contributing to O’Keeffe’s renown (258–9). This internationalizing trend, which brings O’Keeffe and her work to larger audiences and increases the market value of her art, is consistent with a general shift on behalf of O’Keeffe’s gate-keepers to grant researchers and the public more access to primary sources, including her two New Mexico houses. These developments have increased revenue for O’Keeffe stakeholders, encouraged opportunities for scholarly collaboration, and opened up possibilities for reconsiderations of her art and legacy.

The Tate Modern’s exhibition and book *Georgia O’Keeffe* takes up the latter challenge: “we aim to return to the work and give a more reflective, detailed and nuanced reading of [O’Keeffe’s] oeuvre that has been presented, spanning the six principle decades of her activity from her early charcoal abstractions to her late skyscraper paintings,” the museum directors state in the book’s foreword (6). This is a large claim given the number of major exhibitions that have been held since O’Keeffe’s death in 1986. Whether the exhibition’s sponsors achieved this goal, saying that they strove to do so raises a series of questions about how museum professionals promote O’Keeffe’s celebrity and compete for power over representation. Are these museum directors distinguishing their exhibition from all those that preceded it, or only from those staged internationally? In either case, how did this exhibition differ from those held, for example, in 1987–8 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, or from “the first international exhibition” held in 1993 at London’s Hayward Gallery, which also travelled to museums in Mexico and Japan (Eldredge 9)? And, finally, most relevant to my purposes here, how does the Tate Modern exhibition catalogue attempt to translate the claim of “return[ing] to the work and giv[ing] a more reflective, detailed and nuanced reading of [O’Keeffe’s] oeuvre” (6) into book form?

One way Tanya Barson does so is by creating a text that functions as a contrapuntal mélange of contemporary and historical essays, criticism, catalogue statements, and images in order to decouple interpretations of O’Keeffe’s work from the gendered and the sexual that have marred our ability to see her as a modern artist. Primary documents, such as early reviews written by men in Alfred Stieglitz’s circle that typecast O’Keeffe and her art as female and erotic, and some of O’Keeffe’s published statements, are interspersed as interludes between scholarly essays and reproductions of O’Keeffe’s drawings and paintings. While these primary sources are undoubtedly new to the general public, they are well-known by feminist scholars who have studied them exhaustively. The last document, a 1993 essay by artist Susan Hillier, is also the

kind of source specialists know well. Sandwiched between the final scholarly essay and the artist chronology, this autobiographical reflection entitled “O’Keeffe as I See Her” includes Hillier talking about O’Keeffe’s influence on her—“she was the only artist who was female, whom I’d ever heard positively praised. Without her, I might have gone for longer imagining that art was an exclusively male game, like American football” (227)—as well as musings about O’Keeffe’s agency in her relationship with Stieglitz. Wondering about O’Keeffe’s role in Stieglitz’s famous portraits, which show her in front of her paintings, Hillier asks: “Was it his idea? Or did she, for once, suggest the idea for her poses to the photographer?” (231). Everything Hillier talks about is well-trod ground in O’Keeffe studies. So what purpose do these textual interludes serve?

Most fundamentally, they are a key element of the book’s collage-like form, which seeks to achieve two goals: one is that the assortment of materials speaks simultaneously to the general public as well as to O’Keeffe specialists and interested scholars; and the other is that the book’s form refuses an easy, consumable narrative, because it requires readers to make choices about what they read and look at and the order in which they do so. Like a modernist novel, the book’s form also requires readers to make meaning of the texts’ sequencing and to create connections among the pieces.

In essence, then, *Georgia O’Keeffe* as an exhibition catalogue attempts to replicate the same modernist aesthetics, such as fragmentation, rupture, and magnification, that shaped O’Keeffe and that she used in her work; it also replicates the central question the exhibition poses: is it possible to see O’Keeffe and her art differently, outside of previous lenses and frameworks, if we alter our angles of vision? Coming after the scholarly essays and the resplendently full-colour images of O’Keeffe’s artwork, the primary sources acknowledge earlier discourses as part of O’Keeffe’s history at the same time that they compel readers to reassess their meaning and significance now that they have new frames of reference.

The six illustrated scholarly essays facilitate the re-orientation. Positioned before the images and primary sources, they are the book’s anchoring texts and authoritative guide, shifting the focus from how gender and sexuality affected O’Keeffe’s artistic practice to analyses of the artistic practice itself. All the essays confirm that place, gender, modernism, and nature remain crucial subjects in O’Keeffe studies, but they take these subjects in new directions. For example, in a generative rethinking of the importance of place in O’Keeffe’s art, “Location and Dislocation in the Life and Art of Georgia O’Keeffe,” Cody Hartley argues that O’Keeffe’s “intentional disruptions and transitions” created by living in different geographical locations and, later in life, by international travel affected her art-making (145). O’Keeffe “thrived upon frequent transplantations” and made places homelike, Cody notes, and she also adapted to wherever she was, which enabled her to take “something productive” from the experience (145). Maintaining a “balance of rootedness and disruption, location

and dislocation” (152), O’Keeffe found inspiration in different locales, climates, and communities, which she translated into art using “abstraction, incorporating a modern sense of spiritualism based in the experience of the natural world, and developing a powerfully modern sense of composition, which played with scale and successfully overturned formulas for cohesive compositions” (150).

Of all the essays in the catalogue, Tanya Barson’s magisterial overview does the most to alter the gendered and sexualized interpretative frame of O’Keeffe’s work, first established by Stieglitz in the 1910s. Focusing on O’Keeffe’s achievements, Barson proposes that the artist was fundamental to the development of US modernism because she created modern art by taking a classic American subject—the landscape—and making it new through modernist practices, most notably by employing abstraction and photographic techniques of framing and cropping. Throughout the essay, Barson continues to shift the critical discourse from a psychological and decontextualized treatment of the artist and her work, and nowhere is this more evident than in the way she changes the conversation about influence. In addition to discussing concepts and artistic practices not typically associated with O’Keeffe’s paintings, such as synaesthesia and luminism, she also concentrates on O’Keeffe’s influence on other artists, both male and female, rather than on Stieglitz’s influence on O’Keeffe, a much-noted topic that has trailed O’Keeffe’s reputation from the 1920s to the present day. In yet another important shift, Barson analyses denunciations of O’Keeffe’s work in the 1940s in the larger context of masculine art world power struggles. Clement Greenberg’s oft-repeated defamation of O’Keeffe’s work as merely decorative, Barson argues, was really about his jockeying to replace Stieglitz as agent, critic, and prophet for abstract expressionist artists in the period.

Finally, Barson’s brief discussion of the political import of O’Keeffe’s paintings is the most significant recasting of earlier limiting interpretative frameworks. Introducing the idea that some of O’Keeffe’s paintings reference and respond to “the predicament of the times” (14), such as the Great Depression and World War II, Barson inaugurates a fruitful new direction in O’Keeffe studies. This kind of analysis is a welcome change from strictly biographical interpretations that see O’Keeffe’s paintings of bones and torn leaves as reflecting personal pain. Positing that in the 1940s, during the height of World War II, O’Keeffe “painted her darkest, desolate, and arguably most violent images of the landscape” (18), Barson opens up a new way of thinking about the artist’s work as political, and she demonstrates how productive it is to engage this view, as in this illustrative example:

[O’Keeffe’s] *Black Place* paintings . . . address a wider context. The transformation of her visual language in relation to the “Black Place” came following the publication of Clement Greenberg’s essay advocating abstract art as the realization of an unavoidable historical trajectory . . . and the United States’ entry into the Second World War in 1941. It occurred in the context of debates concerning art as a form

of escapism from, or reflection on, the war, and amid a further impetus to reflect on American culture as distinct from that of the war-torn Old World. (17–8)

In *Women Modernists in New York*, Ellen Roberts also makes a convincing case that the political is central. For her, however, “the political” means how material forces and conditions affect women’s art-making, not how the art that they created responds to these forces and conditions. From this perspective, history and biography remain critical components of understanding how gender affected women artists’ imaginings and careers. As Roberts notes in the book’s introduction, for O’Keeffe, Stettheimer, Torr, and Zorach, “their identity as women shaped the circumstances under which they worked, the forms their art took, and especially the way their pictures were seen by their culture” (13). Instead of organizing the book thematically like the exhibition, Roberts treats the artists separately in individual chapters, underscoring each woman’s singularity and suggesting that all four are equally valuable. In each chapter, Roberts provides biographical background relevant to the artists’ careers and allows them to speak in their own words, quoting liberally from their diaries, interviews, exhibition statements, correspondence, and, in O’Keeffe’s case, her 1976 book, *Georgia O’Keeffe*. The difference between the organizational structure of the exhibition and the book compels us to think about the most effective way to exhibit and write about women artist communities. What is gained and what is lost if the artists’ work is shown collectively in an exhibition and discussed separately in the accompanying catalogue?

A collective treatment favours comparisons and aids in understanding larger social forces that affect all the women and their art-making, but this is not the approach Roberts chooses. While she occasionally refers to the shared affiliations and situations of the four artists, more comparisons between and among them would have been beneficial. For example, the importance of support is a major theme that recurs in each chapter. All of the women found some support through family relations (Stettheimer), intimate relationships (Zorach, O’Keeffe, Torr), and male dealers and gallery owners, which enabled them to arrange their lives so they had the requisite time to work. But these supports, Roberts underscores throughout, were never enough. In each case, the women internalized gender prescriptions of their race, class, and status that impeded their artistic productivity. Zorach and Torr privileged their husbands’ careers over their own; Stettheimer retreated to the private realm, which enabled her artistic freedom but contributed to her obscurity; and O’Keeffe’s most powerful advocate created a limiting framework for viewing her work, which persists to this day.

The lack of sufficient support is not all that O’Keeffe, Stettheimer, Torr, and Zorach had in common. These artists were also white and well-educated, and they received institutionalized art training. Additionally, three of the four were married to artist husbands with connections and influence. But Roberts misses the opportunity to discuss their race and class privilege, as well as how some of their work reveals this

perspective. Two paintings of intimate domestic scenes that depict black women as white women's caregivers especially beckon comment. In Marguerite Zorach's *Ella Madison and Dahlov* (Figure 17), a massive and dignified white-haired black woman cradles a small white baby, identified as the painter's daughter; and in Florine Stettheimer's *Jenny and Genevieve* (Figure 6), a black woman brings an abundant tray of fruit to a white woman sitting at a table, forlornly holding her face in her hands. At the very least, these two paintings suggest that their creators were privileged by race at the same time that they were disadvantaged by gender. This omission points to a vein of investigation in O'Keeffe studies that scholars have not yet explored: how did O'Keeffe's white privilege affect her choice of subjects and her treatment of them, her relationships with other artists, and the ways she sought support throughout her career?

All three exhibitions and books reprise the modernist dictum "Make it New!" by attempting to present O'Keeffe and her work in new frameworks and contexts, but all three, ironically, keep it old, because they are forced to grapple with the same gender issues that bedevilled O'Keeffe and her female peers. Most basically, as Roberts notes, women modernists created art "in a world in which discrimination against women was deeply embedded" (143). The Tate Modern's exhibition and book laudably attempted to recast O'Keeffe, the way we see her paintings, and how we think about her work. But in its earnest effort to do so, does it erase elements of O'Keeffe's history that shed light on how her experiences were more similar to, rather than different from, other ambitious women of her era? Does Wanda Corn's focus on O'Keeffe's self-styling and domestic aesthetic reify her connection to the decorative, commercial, and feminine, and inadvertently keep the artist in a limited, gendered domain? And, finally, how is it best to understand the significance of gender on O'Keeffe's sensibility, work, and career? Do we discount it and focus on the formal properties of her artistic practices? Do we study the artist and her work in isolation, or situate her in women's communities? We need more exhibitions and catalogues like these three to help us explore these questions and pose new ones.

Linda M. Grasso is Professor of English at York College and Professor of Liberal Studies at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. She is the author of *Equal under the Sky: Georgia O'Keeffe and Twentieth-Century Feminism* (University of New Mexico Press, 2017) and *The Artistry of Anger: Black and White Women's Literature in America, 1820–1860* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), as well as numerous essays about US women writers and culture.

WORKS CITED

Castro, Jan Garden. *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*. New York: Crown, 1985.

Eldredge, Charles C. *Georgia O'Keeffe: American and Modern* [exhibition catalogue, Haywood Gallery, London] New Haven, CT: Yale UP, in association with InterCulture, Fort Worth, TX, 1993.

Lisle, Laurie. *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe*. 1980. New York: Washington Square, 1986.

Lynes, Barbara Buhler. "Selected Bibliography." *Georgia O'Keeffe Catalogue Raisonné*. Vol 2. Ed. Barbara Buhler Lynes. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1999. 1162–78.

Lynes, Barbara Buhler. *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916–1929*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.

Peters, Sarah Whitaker. *Becoming O'Keeffe: The Early Years*. 1991. New York: Abbeville, 2001.

Rich, Daniel Catton. Introduction. *Georgia O'Keeffe* [exhibition catalogue]. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1943. 9–40.