

Lynn Turner

### **Sanguine resistance: handling a clitoral palette in Artemisia Gentileschi**

‘(actually because of its diminished size)’ – Sigmund Freud, ‘The Taboo of Virginity’ [1917] 1991.

‘Why must we stop painting the portrait of the clitoris just as it appears, its ink still wet, so to speak?’ – Catherine Malabou, *Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought* [2020] 2022.

How do ‘we’ stand before the law? After Derrida’s dazzling response to Freud’s indictment of ‘emancipated’ literary women as the worst or best exemplars of penis envy, I take erection as my subject. Direction, moral rectitude, rights and writing are organised by Freud within the defensive formation of the fictional phallic stance, eternally erect. Rather than counter Freud in modes that would retain the same logic, through denial (there is no castration) or a false equivalence (everyone is castrated), Derrida welcomes the changes in size quietly admitted in Freud’s parenthesis. Thus, an inherent variability displaces the binary of presence or absence of penis (sexual difference reduced to sexual sameness for Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman*). The *fort/da* of detumescence/tumescence is our general condition. The blood that Derrida follows in the *Death Penalty* seminars - blood constrained to cruelty, to being made to flow and/or disappear into the concept – now pulses within the vicissitudes of erection ‘in men and in women,’ both situated as sites of sexual differences.

Leaning away from Freud’s appropriation of the bloody encounter of *Judith and Holofernes*, a scene more famously expressed by the painter Artemisia Gentileschi, I want to reanimate another of Gentileschi’s works: her *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638). Catherine Malabou ironically forgets her own advice in *Pleasure Erased* since her book contains no trace of the 1998 revelation of the extent of clitoral anatomy through urologist Helen O’Donnell’s scans (bar a passing comment in the English translator’s introduction) and thus her clitoral ‘portrait’ is barely touched upon. Brush in one hand, palette held perpendicular to the viewer in the other, this paper turns towards Gentileschi’s self-portrait of herself painting herself in autoaffective anticipation of flaring clitoral structure, dismantling our binary preconceptions of scale, of visibility and sex before the law.

#### **Bio:**

Originally trained as an artist, Lynn Turner is a writer working between continental philosophy (especially deconstruction), feminist theory, psychoanalysis, animal studies and visual culture. She is the author of *Poetics of Deconstruction: on the threshold of differences* (Bloomsbury, 2020); co-editor of *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018); editor of *The Animal Question in Deconstruction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013) and co-author of *Visual Cultures As... Recollection* (Sternberg, 2013). Her new collection, *Erotics of Deconstruction: Autoaffectation After Derrida*, will be published by Edinburgh University Press in 2024. She is the co-Head of Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London.

