

Digitizing History: Gendering Interpretations of Historic Sites

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BARBARA L. ALLEN, AIA
University of Southwestern Louisiana

Reconstituting the Vanished: Gender and the Shaping of Public Places in the Delta South, was conceived in response to a lack of information on the role of women in designing public space in the region. As an architectural historian I am interested in how multi-cultural women's history can be transmitted beyond the classroom into the public realm in an effective manner. My solution was to design a series of public history exhibits that creatively combined images with text to evoke new "readings" of the built environment. After careful theorizing I enlisted the help of a feminist digital photographer Lynda Frese to complete the series in a collaborative manner.

Historically the photograph has often been used by museum curators as a transparent proof of past reality. As postmodernism, however, has questioned the truth status of history, so has digitization challenged the evidentiary status of the photograph. This epistemological shift is amplified in writing women's/gender history where the dual problems of what counts as evidence and what are the limits of interpretation arise. Though the hybrid representation device of text and image those histories may be told, not as an archival truth claim, but as a multi-layered conjecture of the past.

This text and digital image means of representation attempts to engage the viewer/reader as an active participant in history-making and is critical in public exhibits for two reasons. First, the heterogeneity of the public requires interpretive strategies that are plural and have a certain degree of ambiguity necessary for interpretation by a diverse audience. And second, the amount of time a public museum patron spends viewing a display is considerably less than a scholar spends reading and analyzing a written article. The problem is: how to convey the complex webs of meaning in a women's history project given the limitations of time and viewer diversity? The exhibition series *Reconstituting the Vanished* is an attempt to mediate the seemingly incommensurable realms of public understanding and theoretical rigor within a public history project about women's contributions to the shaping of their environments.

The exhibits reinterpret currently accessible historic sites by reinscribing the contributions of women and the discourse

of gender in the making of those public places. The series is four separate documentary exhibits examining the lives of women using photographs and narrative to re-tell their story in a public display format. By using physical places as the grounding point of women's lives I wanted to extend a new feminist reading of these Southern women's pasts and the places they built in order to recover and reconstruct a new gender-inclusive public memory.

The three women featured to date, Marie Therese Coin-Coin (1742-1816), Micaela Antonia Almonester y Rojas Pontalba (1795-1874), and Caroline Dormon (1888-1971) left indelible marks upon the real and imaginary landscape of French-African-Spanish-American Louisiana. Marie Coin-Coin, born a slave, was granted freedom at the age of forty-four and given her small parcel of undeveloped land on which she built into one of the largest plantations in northern Louisiana. Before her death she had purchased all of her children and grandchildren out of slavery and left a wealthy legacy to the Creole community she founded, now called Melrose. Micaela Pontalba, the child of a wealthy Spanish official in New Orleans, was disabled by domestic violence but was able to develop central New Orleans in grand European style. Her legacy, the Pontalba Apartment Buildings and the transformation of Jackson Square, today define the city's distinctive French Quarter style. Caroline Dormon, forester and naturalist, was the sole architect of the largest public space in Louisiana, the Kisatchie National Forest. The last project, *Marie Laveau: Place and the Politics of Myth*, will be completed in April 1997. It will examine the iconic figure of this woman (mother/daughter, voodoo priestess, civil rights leader, cultural leader, creator of "white fear") to uncover how and why a mythic discourse of Laveau has been inscribed within the city fabric of New Orleans. Born the same year as the Baroness Pontalba, Laveau represents the unofficial transcript of the city's formation via Afro-Caribbean culture.

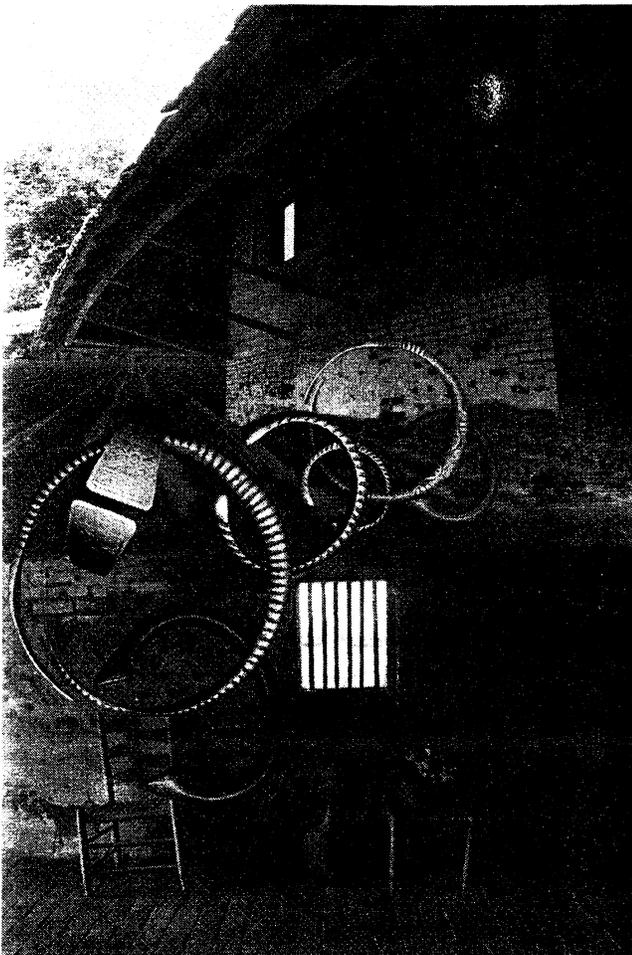
Lynda Frese and I began each women's history project with personal accounts and local stories. We examined both the discourses and practices of everyday life focusing on the intersections of the private lives and with their public

domains. These women have substantial built projects attributable to their visions and actions, yet have been almost disremembered by official narratives of the historic sites. The presentation of the work is not linear; it avoids the traditional beginning, middle, and end that often overdetermines meaning. Instead, the reader can begin at any point in the exhibit and thread a remarkable tale of both agency and social situatedness in the construction and memory of women's spaces as told through the textual, material and oral traces found today. Documents and photographs, both current and historic, were used as well as interviews with relatives and current community members. Local informants having formed cultural and spatial interpretations were given equal authority with the archival data in recovering and documenting the histories. In this way the methods I used were similar to anthropological renderings of the past.

The return of narrative, voice and orality through texts, quotes, interviews accompanies the use of visual photographic imagery to frame an inclusive history in the exhibits.

Fragments of the past can be reconstituted in such a way to come alive through the interpretation of the viewer instead of relying on traditional static and monistic renditions of Truth. The addition of the text often acts to secure visual meaning, while the paradoxes inherent in the photographic medium serve to denaturalize the subject of both text and image.

By digitizing images from both past and present into one frame the linear nature of traditional history is subverted and the past may be understood as a layer of experiences, events and places. History becomes less a temporal truth claim than an imagistic layering of spatial events forming a constellation-like ethos of place. It connects time to a specific gendered geography examining a place's transition through memory and across time. To understand history as an image-narrative is to **not** enter the truth/myth debate but to suspend ourselves between both; the image is an articulation device, an intertext, between language and history.



above: the Baroness Pontalba exhibit installed

left: artist Lynda Frese's digital image titled "Slavery" from the Marie Coin-Coin exhibit. Following is the text that accompanied the image.

The name, Coin-Coin, as well as the form and construction of the Africa House, are arguably African in origin. Current research reveals a distinct and cohesive African culture in Louisiana, indicating that many formal traditions were kept and adapted to the harsh conditions of outpost life. According to legend, this building served as both storage space and jail as evidenced by the window bars and doors. Having been a slave herself, Marie Thereze did not practice corporal punishment. She determined sentences for incarceration for her slaves who marked the days of their confinement by carving notches in the brick.