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Introduction

Catherine Grant

Linda Nochlin's essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', first published in 1971, established the ground for feminist art history. It remains relevant today for its vivid critique of 'greatness' as an innate quality, as well as exploring how women artists have managed to succeed against institutional exclusion and social inequalities. As a number of commentators have explored, the term 'woman artist' is as much of a historical construction as that of the 'great artist'.¹ The focus on artists who are women enabled a wider critique of the ideological underpinnings of art history that, at the time Nochlin was writing, often masked the grounds for assigning greatness, talent and success. As Nochlin put it, the supposedly neutral position of the scholar in most disciplines was 'in reality the white-male-position-accepted-as-natural'.² She then detailed the impact of this on artists 'who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class, and, above all, male.'³ Her conclusions and suggested lines of further enquiry remain open for further investigation today.

In the fifty years since its publication, Nochlin's essay has become a touchstone for feminist writers, artists and curators. Many undergraduate courses in art and art history continue to set it as an entry point into discussions around structural inequality and the fantasies that still

¹ See Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher eds, *Women Artists at the Millennium*, 2006.

² Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', 1971, in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, 1988, p. 145. Unless noted otherwise, all subsequent quotations are from this reprint.

³ *Ibid*, p. 150.

abound when thinking about creativity and greatness. The title ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ has permeated popular culture to the extent that it was emblazoned on T-Shirts at a Dior fashion show in 2017, with beautifully bound copies of the essay distributed to the spectators. With many women artists now considered ‘great’, is it still necessary to engage with Nochlin’s essay in detail? In this introduction, I will argue Nochlin’s critical analysis exposes assumptions that are still hard to shake within art and art history. I will summarise her essay’s key points, and contextualise them in relation to Nochlin’s own opinion of this foundational work, drawing on the second essay published here, written in 2001, ending with a consideration of what is needed for feminist art history today.

One of the key elements of Nochlin’s 1971 essay is how she responds to the question ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’. In the original version of her essay, published in the journal *ARTnews* as part of a special issue on ‘Women’s Liberation, Woman Artists and Art History,’ an introductory line reads ‘Implications of the Women’s Lib movement for art history and for the contemporary art scene – or, silly questions deserve long answers’.⁴ This line is not reproduced in the subsequent reprints of the text, but points to a crucial element of Nochlin’s argument: the title is a ‘silly question’. Within the essay she warns that the question is not to be taken at face value, but instead interrogates its assumptions. This leads to her central argument that creativity is fostered through institutional and educational support, not a mysterious germ of genius or talent. To make her point, she asks the reader to reformulate the question in regards to another demographic: the aristocracy. She argues that like women, aristocrats have not historically become great artists because the demands and expectations of their social position has ‘made total devotion to professional art production

⁴ Linda Nochlin, ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’, *ARTnews*, January 1971, p. 23.

out of the question'.⁵ She argues that 'art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation', specifying a range of institutions and expectations including 'art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast.'⁶ For women, then, she sets out (in one of the most quoted sections of the essay):

The fault lies not in the stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education – education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals.⁷

After demolishing the fuzzy ground underpinning notions of 'greatness' (including a detailed exploration of how women were excluded from a foundational skill for artists from the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century: drawing from nude models), Nochlin moves onto explore how women artists *have* succeeded. Using the nineteenth-century painter Rosa Bonheur as a case study, she describes how Bonheur's father was a 'impoverished drawing master', and that like many men (Nochlin cites Picasso), having an artist-father allowed for the blossoming of creativity that might later be attributed to a mysterious notion of genius. What she doesn't explore in detail is the presence of Rosa Bonheur's partner, the artist Nathalie Micas. Nochlin asserts that their relationship was most likely platonic, whereas now it is generally accepted that the two women lived as a married couple. Here Bonheur has an 'artist-wife' or an 'artist-sister' as well as an 'artist-father', pointing to a proto-queer-feminist community of at least two. By describing Bonheur's life, 'masculine' dress, and relationships, Nochlin indirectly points to the subsequent emergence of lesbian and queer

⁵ Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', p. 157.

⁶ Ibid., p. 158.

⁷ Ibid., p. 150.

feminist thinking around communities, sexuality and non-normative kinship structures that continues into the present, as well as her insight that individual men's support, particularly that of artist-fathers, has been crucial in the face of patriarchal exclusions.

In discussing successful women artists such as Bonheur, Nochlin concedes that they may have not been art superstars on the level with Michelangelo or Picasso, but nonetheless, carved out spaces for themselves across the centuries, ranging from the thirteenth-century sculptor Sabina von Steinbach through to twentieth-century artists including Käthe Kollwitz and Barbara Hepworth. In her later writing, and in subsequent critiques of her work, this notion of masculine, Western superstardom is itself qualified on as specific to the post-World War Two period. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's important volume *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, from 1981, further argues that women artists were present in writing and exhibitions *until* the twentieth century, when they were erased from histories of art from the rise of modernism onwards. As Pollock puts it, feminist art historians in the 1970s 'had to become archaeologists' to undo the 'structural sexism in the discipline of Art History itself.'⁸

In Nochlin's subsequent writing, and through curation of shows starting with *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (with Ann Sutherland Harris) in 1976, she contributed to the huge project of re-imagining histories of art that do not exclude or belittle the work of women artists. In the original publication of 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' there are numerous illustrations that run alongside the text, ranging from a nun's collaborative medieval illumination from the tenth century to contemporary works by Agnes Martin and

⁸ Griselda Pollock, 'A Lonely Preface,' in Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, 1981, second edition 2013, p. xxiii, p. xvii.

Louise Bourgeois. A full page image of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (c. 1615-20) is placed opposite the title page of the original magazine version of the essay, with the caption asserting that this painting could be '[a] banner for Women's Lib'! Whilst the captions are not explicitly attributed to Nochlin, they have the same conversational lightness that drives her profoundly serious argument. These illustrated artworks by women assert the richness of practices that have been excluded from histories of art, claims their importance, whilst still holding onto the central argument that refutes the ideological basis for traditional art historical judgement. The complex interplay that Nochlin achieves in the essay is sometimes misunderstood as a call to create a canon of great women artists. This is not the case, but her essay does begin to provide her (women) readers with the tools to imagine what it means to be a successful artist or write about women's art.

Thirty years later, in 2001, Nochlin explored how in the 1970s feminist art history had to be constructed: 'new materials had to be sought out, theoretical bases put in place, methodologies gradually developed.'⁹ In her essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?: Thirty Years After' she argues that 'feminist art history is there to make trouble, to call into question, to ruffle feathers in patriarchal dovecotes.'¹⁰ This trouble-making was done in 1971 by the incisive analysis of notions of 'genius' and 'greatness', but also through imagining the relevance of this trouble-making to the contemporary context of the Women's Liberation Movement. Even earlier than this, Nochlin had been concerned with thinking through the stakes of being marginalised, or 'othered', and what this might offer to radical forms of scholarship. In another of her pithy, often-quoted statements she says 'Nothing, I think, is more interesting, more poignant, and more difficult to seize, than the intersection of

⁹ Linda Nochlin, "'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?'" Thirty Years After,' in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, p. 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

the self and history.¹¹ Written as part of an essay that recounts her intellectual formation, including her experiences of the Women's Liberation Movement, she describes how she came to reject a single approach when it came to her art historical work, and how she developed an 'ad hoc methodology' which drew on personal experience, political theory and social history, as well as traditional art historical methods such as iconography.¹² To describe this 'intersection between self and history' she recounts a trip to the UK in 1948, where, at age seventeen, she said she first understood herself as 'a Jew from Brooklyn.'¹³ This sense of being marginalised in relation to dominant cultural structures, and how it made her interrogate the 'white-male-position-accepted-as-natural', led to Nochlin's life-long interest in thinking about identity and its representation. Across the course of her incredibly rich career she explored many topics alongside her well-known focus on gender, including the representation of Jewish identity, ageing, 'Orientalism', motherhood, eroticism and class relations.

The range of topics that can be found in Nochlin's writing points to her intersectional feminist approach, one that is very much needed fifty years after the publication of her famous essay. Discussions that have taken place since the early 1970s around race, class, ethnicity and sexuality are still areas where more research is needed in relation to feminist politics and art history. Nochlin's 1971 title has been often repurposed, as in a recent essay by Eliza Steinbock which asks 'Why have there been no great trans* artists?'.¹⁴ Researchers such as Nochlin, Pollock and other pioneers of feminist art history describe going into the stores of galleries and museums to find works by women artists that had not been displayed

¹¹ Linda Nochlin, 'Introduction: Memoirs of An Ad Hoc Art Historian,' *Representing Women*, 1999, p. 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁴ Eliza Steinbock, 'Collecting Creative Transcestors: Trans* Portraiture Hirstory, from Snapshots to Sculpture,' in Hilary Robinson and Maria Elena Buszek eds, *A Companion to Feminist Art*, 2019.

for decades in the 1970s. This is paralleled in recent years with current research uncovering works by artists of colour, such as the database created by the Black Artists and Modernism project through an audit of ‘artworks by black artists in public collections’ in the UK.¹⁵ A survey of recent publications on feminist art history shows a range of global and transnational perspectives, although this is far from established. What is in place, however, is a strong community of feminist art historians and artists, who are building on the legacy of the critiques of art history begun in the 1970s.

It is with this focus on feminist community that I want to end. Nochlin’s two essays reprinted here both insist on the importance of the communities that her writing has emerged from. In addition, in ‘Memoirs of an Ad Hoc Art Historian,’ she recalls in detail the first seminar on women and art that she taught at Vassar College in 1969, and how it provided much of the groundwork for her 1971 essay. She includes herself when she describes the undergraduates as ‘a committed group of proto-feminist researchers’, and how they were ‘both inventors and explorers: inventors of hypotheses and concepts, navigating the vast sea of undiscovered bibliographical material, the underground rivers and streams of women’s art and the representations of women.’¹⁶ In her essay from 2001 reprinted here, she continues to pay tribute to the community of scholars that make up feminist art history, refusing to be positioned as a figurehead, and instead confirming that ‘We have – as a community, working together – changed the discourse and the production of our field.’ She also warns against masculine heroics which she sees returning in art, politics and culture, returns that are still present today.¹⁷ In the face of this, for the readers fifty years on, Nochlin’s description of the

¹⁵ ‘BAM National Collections Audit,’ led by Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton as part of the Black Artists and Modernism project (2015-2018), <http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/black-artists-in-public-collections/> [accessed 22 April 2020].

¹⁶ Linda Nochlin, ‘Introduction: Memoirs of An Ad Hoc Art Historian,’ *Representing Women*, 1999, p. 19.

¹⁷ Mignon Nixon elaborates on this in her tribute essay ‘Women, Art and Power After Linda Nochlin,’ *October* 163, March 2019, pp. 131-132.

group of proto-feminist researchers is still important. For all of us committed to the ongoing, varied, intersectional and evolving project of writing feminist art history and making feminist art, we need to continue to see ourselves as ‘inventors and explorers’, to continue to ask questions and embrace causing trouble.

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