Mobile Fidelities

Conversations on Feminism, History and Visuality

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List of Contents

ISSN: 1462-0426

Art History and Historiography
Writing History "Otherly"

Linda Nochlin

White men have dominated the discourses of Western art history for centuries. In 1971, you published an important essay entitled "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" which was a turning point for a radical feminist reconceptualization of the discipline, and for the visibility of women artists. In this essay, you argued against meta-historical premises of "greatness" and so called "natural" assumptions, and suggested instead a view of art in terms of its social coordinates. Thirty years after your essay appeared in a special women's issue of Artforum*, would you answer the question about the historical absence of "old mistresses," to use the term of Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker differently? How has the situation of women in visual arts changed since then?*

I still stick by my guns. I think women have changed the discourse of art and art history enormously, and - whatever anyone wants to say - it is much better for women artists today than thirty years ago. Part of the reason has to do with the nature of postmodernism and its rejection of a so-called "canon" or "canonicity" of certain modernist ideas. The new premises of postmodernism permit a much less absolute and superior kind of both production and interpretation. Cindy Sherman, Rachel Whiteread, Kiki Smith, Mona Hatoum, or Louise Bourgeois, to name just a few of contemporary women artists, transform the normativity of the celebrated modernist model. The problem these artists deal with involves women, and I would say that they differ from classical modernism but also from the necessarily "feminist" and often very essentialist topics of the 1970s feminist art. At least in the United States, the improvement of the position of women is mainly a result of political and

ISSN: 1462-0426

art activism as well as the increased consciousness of women. This has led to the actual change in the power structures, and, consequently, to the change of what constitutes valid art and art practices. In contemporary art, there is for instance a huge emphasis on the body. The body comprehended from various perspectives is in the forefront, and it is not simply a kind of classical body, or a traditional nude. It is the body through which artists dismantle old schema, and through which the whole agenda of body politics comes up. Provoked by this shift, I decided to teach a course on the body entitled "Typologies of the Nude."

Since I wrote "Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists," many things changed, but we should still be focused and work on equality between men and women, and challenge what equality means in various places and various moments. Even though I am convinced that women really have much more power, a woman is certainly not a head of the Museum of Modern Art, or the Metropolitan Museum (MET). Let me give another example. I was shocked to see that the MET organized a big symposium to go with a wonderful Ingres exhibition, and despite a number of important women scholars working on the famous French classicist, none of them were included. This shows an absolute blindness on the part of the organizers, and this is the circumstance where the political and art activism of women's groups such as the Guerrilla Girls would be needed even nowadays. If I would confront the MET, I would most probably get the answer that the absence of women was a pure accident, but it shouldn't be a pure accident! This example shows that there are still many opportunities for various little shake-ups.

Well, a big shake-up needs to be done in the country I am coming from. Unfortunately, not only male but also female scholars in East Eastern Europe continue to be suspicious about any suggestion of feminist art and art history...

Sure, because they identify with those in power, and that is always more comfortable.

Doesn't this lead us to the question of how is the subject of art history constituted, or, on the contrary diminished? You wrote back in 1971: 'To encourage a dispassionate, impersonal, sociological and institutionally-oriented approach would reveal the entire romantic, elitist, individual-glorifying and monograph-producing substructure upon which the profession of art history is based, and which has only recently been called into question by a group of younger dissidents.' This notion is clearly related to challenging the semi-religious conception of the male artist's and male scholar's role in history, but it doesn't answer the crucial question of how to enable women to become subjects of art history themselves. Moreover, it stands in a strong contrast to your own writing in which the "I" and personal experience have always played a significant role. As you put it in 1979, 'I don't distinguish between the self and the

society... In talking about myself, I'm talking about a social issue.' It seems to me that this discrepancy reflects an ironic coincidence of Barthesian or Foucauldian "death of the author" and increasing women's awareness of their own historical marginalization. Could you comment on this problem?

I think that the major irony is that we get the "death of the author" at the moment when women are finally enabling themselves to become the authors. It is a contradiction, and we have to see it as a kind of dialectical process. It means that the concept of the "author" needs to change as much as the position of women vis-à-vis this imaginary construction of the author. However, something new always emerges from such contradictory impulses. As a historian, I do not believe in any "either/or" process; instead, I believe in contradictions subsuming new historical innovations, such as this one. Even though women were beginning to be named in the 1970s, they did not have any level of reputation or standing comparable to male artists. Women and other marginalized groups that enter history do not simply substitute for white male authority; they change the whole paradigm. Instead of occupying the position of heroes, they bring new premises into art.

Do you think that some of these premises are linked to women bringing more personal and intimate voices into art?

It's hard to say that, because who could be more personal than, let's say, Picasso? I would rather say that it is a certain difference in asserting the power of the "self" which might have changed the paradigm from the perspective of the personal, and which suggested a conception of the artist in a new mode.

Can I ask you more explicitly about feminist methodology of art history and art criticism? Many feminists argue that to use any explicitly defined methodology is to appropriate the hegemonic voice of "truth-telling", the absolute signifier of a single perspective which would fabricate another master narrative. Yet, a wide range of interpretative models and methodologies are used by feminist writers and historians, such as psychoanalytic theory, poststructuralism, sociology, social history, Marxism, or comparative literature. It seems to me that there is no text without style or methodology, but the challenge consists in how to use these "tools" to bring both the studied topic and the method itself into a question. As one of the first feminist art historians, you have been occupied with these issues for a long time. In The Politics of Vision *(1989), you claimed to participate in a "revisionist project" in which feminism is conceived both as theory and as politics. In your most recent book* Representing Women *(1999), you describe yourself as an "ad hoc art historian" whose methodology is "a-user-friendly eclecticism;" here, you again take feminism as an aesthetic and political commitment, and emphasize its plurality and diversity of*

perspectives, opinions, and methods. Also, most of your books are collections of essays rather than continuous narratives with a beginning and an end. You call this kind of writing a "bricolage" through which the phallicity of master narrative could be dismantled. Why does feminist art history exclude traditional methodology, and how can we write history "Otherly?"

I believe that traditional, strictly defined methodology is very reductive, because it assumes the universality of a single perspective. Writing history "Otherly", is, once again, a dialectic process. As I formulate the issue, the methodology, so to speak, grows partly out of it, and that's the notion of "bricolage", a kind of back-and-forth between problematizing the issue and the theoretical apparatus of approaching the issue. Such methodology is always on the move, it shifts all the time, and that might be one of the reasons why I prefer articles, which reflect more immediately how I think. I am not a narrative person who would think in terms of the grand finale. Such a way of thinking is very tempting, but I always try to avoid it, and – let me say – it is hard. As a person who also writes poetry, I feel I am a poet rather than a novelist even while writing art history, which makes me formulate my thoughts around small units rather than linking everything together into a big story. As to the feminist approach to art history, I see it always as a critical approach. I am not an essentialist, and thus have no particular interest in depictions of great goddesses or vaginas. On the contrary, feminist art history is a critical way to unpack, break, or question settled notions about art practice, including the essentialist feminist notions that speak about any inherently "feminine" style or imagery. For instance impressionism is often understood as dealing with subjects of leisure, but one has to ask whose leisure it is? You look at Manet's or Degas's paintings, and you very often see men's leisure supported by working-class women: beer servers, maids, sweating ballerinas, or even prostitutes. Or, you look at Géricault and discover almost an absolute absence of women in his paintings. As a feminist art historian, you have to ask not only what is in art, but what is not there as well, and why?

It is undeniable that the historical experience of women is different than that of men. History was written mostly by men, and this mainstream narrative also emphasizes issues that are important for men. The progress in and of history mirrors this particularity, but, instead of being called as such, it is understood as a universal "wholeness." When women and other groups on the periphery enter history, how does this change the master narrative and chronology of our past?

Whether we like it or not, chronology is chronology. But I understand where you are coming from – all the "other" subjects have different highs and lows in history. I think it is a question of understanding the big concepts within art history. Let's turn to impressionism once again. This movement had some powerful women, Berthe

Morisot and Mary Cassatt, and these two women were undoubtedly central, not peripheral artists in the movement. In the end of the nineteenth century, art critics saw Morisot as the "typical" or "essential" impressionist painter, but while some conceived this style as crucial for modernist painting, for others it was a pure equivalence to femininity: too soft, too intuitive, too much about ungraspable feelings, simply, not rational enough. One should question what this discrepancy meant, and also why there were, for example, no women neo-impressionists when neo-impressionism was unmistakably about science and system. Before the 1917 revolution in Russia, there were a number of practicing, fully independent women artists who participated in trans-evaluating the very historical values that the society and culture were based on: Goncharova, Stepanova, Exter, or Popova. The Russian revolutionary avant-garde wanted to have art that would be different from the old traditions of great men and their disciples. Instead, it was to be art without the subject. How does the participation of these women who, mostly, didn't even sign their works for they believed in new, collective art, transform traditional art history? One also has to challenge the big styles to get to a more complex, and not necessarily linear picture of a historical narrative.

Unlike many other feminist art historians, you most focus not only on re-reading the big styles, but also on work by male artists rather than by women artists. While examining the representation of women, femininity, race, and class, you question the politics of art history, which – despite its revisionist attitude – social history of art often fails to do. Even though you stress the "pleasures of the visual text," you are very critical of a mystifying and ahistorical apparatus of formalism. How is the production of meaning or value in the pictorial realm connected to the production of power and subordination in society? In other words, to paraphrase the title of your book, how does vision become political?

What I am trying to say in that rather ambiguous title is that vision is not merely visual, or, in other words, that visuality is never only natural. The American critic Leo Steinberg once said that the eye is part of the mind, and I would say that the visual is part of the political. The very structure of visuality is controlled by certain power positions. In the nineteenth century, for example, the female nude becomes an object of delectation. It is not just because female nudes delight so well, or that more beautiful brushstrokes could be made upon them, but because certain power and also economic systems come into being which foreground the female nude and place the male nude into the background. However, this was not true in the academic training of the seventeenth century. Nowadays we consider nudes to be mostly female, but it was not so straightforward in those days. When you wanted to submit a piece to the Prix de Rome, you painted according to the rules of the Academy, and it

ISSN: 1462-0426

was the male nude that was the testing ground. In every époque, these things are always over-determined. It is the politics of vision that determines not only how art history "looks" but also what and how it establishes meaning. Visuality and representation are always related to economic, political and social structures. It was mainly consumerism, which emphasized female nudity in art during the nineteenth century.

Fetishism of the female body is a part of the Western artistic tradition. Woman as a passive object of male desire, artistic mastery, commodification, and mass-medialization has been a target of many feminist scholars since the end of the 1960s. However, what you just said about the superiority of the male body in the seventeenth-century painting problematizes the simple dichotomy between the activity of a male creator and passivity of a female model. Recently, this dichotomy has also started to be questioned by a number of both female and male scholars. It is usually argued that "images" return the look, metaphorically or literally, such as a self-confident Olympia in Manet's controversial 1863 painting. The notion of a woman as a voyeur, or a seer, makes issues of artistic representation (but also of pornography) much more complex and ambiguous. When I talked to Kaja Silverman, she strongly objected to feminist didacticism and proclaimed that women should admit that they like to be looked at, but the question remains how does this look operate from outside? As the representation of women and femininity is an important topic for you; what do you think about this discussion? Does the visual marginalization of women necessarily lead to the consolidation of women as subjects?

I find any kind of didacticism very unpleasant, and I agree that in order to reach an equality, it is important for women to be conscious of their own sensuality and sexuality as well. The oversimplified prudery by American women critics – not just art historians but more particularly lawyers such as Catharine MacKinnon – is not only grotesque, but it also sets women back rather than liberating them in any sense. As to art history, it would be similarly flattening and also hard to think of some of Ruben's nudes as being passive objects of the male gaze for these women are bouncing around quite vigorously. We have to be wary of literalizing some critical notions within visual art, and look for other ways of relating to artistic tradition. Women artists who appropriate images, or are working with their own bodies in the postmodern era have made this point very clearly in their works. However, we should also think about the meaning of visual pleasure. What men experience as pleasure could be very often felt as unpleasurable for women. How much does my identity as a woman intervene into a response to watching? Besides being a woman I'm also a professor, American, Jewish, 68-years old... Does it mean anything for my intervention into the visual field, and if so, then what? Visuality is never as simple as a gender dichotomy between women and men, and this should be important for a feminist

reading of art history as well. I have a number of gay men and lesbian women in my class, and they have yet another set of perspectives to bring into the discussion. I believe that one of the virtues of postmodernism is that one can work with a variety of perspectives, that one is not closed into the box of absolute "objectivity," (I use quotes here because what is one person's objectivity is somebody else's subjectivity, and *vice versa*).

Nineteenth-century art, and realism occupies a particularly prominent role in your work. Realism has often been dismissed and misinterpreted by most modernist theories for being a mere mirror of the outer world and not formally experimental, and by implication conservative. It is significant that among the most popular nineteenth and twentieth centuries stereotypes about women artists was the prejudice that they are naturally conservative, traditional, unimaginative, mimetic, simply unable to escape the banal reality of the outer world. What is the connection between your interest in realism, which was seen as a regressive form of art for a long time, and your interest in women artists?

I wrote on Gustave Courbet in my dissertation, and my interest in realism is older than my involvement in feminism and the women's art movement. Only later I wrote some pieces on women realists. Even though there was perhaps more opportunities for women in portrait painting, there were not so many famous women realists either, and I am not sure if there is any direct rapport between the two. The notion that women could not idealize and that they could only be literal is, of course, a mere prejudice because – like all ideologies – such a premise is designed to hide a contradiction. Going back to Berthe Morisot I want to stress again that she was criticized for the opposite; being too vague, too imprecise, too splashy, too all over the place which was a synonym for being too feminine. It seems that women artists are often criticized for absolutely contradictory reasons. What is most important, however, is to realize that, whatever their work is like, they never had an opportunity to do the kind of high-minded and large-scale works that men did. Some feminist art historians might disagree with me, but I imagine that women would do roughly the same kind of art that men do under circumstances of complete equality.

I was struck when I read in the introduction to your last book that only when you were away from home could you discover who you really are. It reminds me of my own current experience of being displaced from home for a long time, uprooted in a sense, and feeling my eyes looking differently, and, perhaps, even more clearly. Isn't it a paradox that if one becomes an outsider one may gain better access to a sense of one's own identity?

ISSN: 1462-0426

It is not a paradox at all. I think one only becomes conscious of the self when one is uneasy, when one is not comfortably located. This consciousness comes precisely when you realize that there are other possibilities of being. I went as a Fulbright scholar to France when I was about twentyeight, and I was flabbergasted by the difference. However, I suddenly became aware of my way as being a way that is part of me and not part of the culture I was temporarily moving in. To be a stranger is being somebody else's "other"; you think of yourself differently but you are also positioned differently. To be a stranger might be difficult or even bitter, but it also is a rich source of thinking anew, a very productive state of mind.

Linda Nochlin is the Lila Acheson Wallace Professor of Modern Art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. She graduated from Vassar College, where she taught for many years, and where she initiated - as early as in 1969 - a groundbreaking course entitled "The Image of Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." Nochlin is a leading critic and art historian whose contribution to feminist cultural history has been enormous. Her many books include *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730 - 1970*, which she co-edited with Thomas B. Hess (New York: Newsweek, 1972), the exhibition catalogue *Women Artists 1550 - 1950*, co-edited with Ann Sutherland Harris (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976), *Gustave Courbet: A Study of Style and Society* (New York: Garland, 1976), *Women, Art, and Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (New York and London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity* (New York and London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), *Representing Women* (New York and London: Thames & Hudson, 1999) and *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006). In 2007, she is curating an exhibition on global feminisms with Maura Reilly as the inaugural exhibition for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. On the occasion of Nochlin's seventieth birthday, a group of distinguished feminist scholars paid hommage to her pioneering work in a book of collected essays *Self and History: A Tribute to Linda Nochlin*, Aruna D'Souza, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).