

Isidro G. Pentzke

Oliver Wasow

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Critical Theory Readings

Pollock G. Modernity and the spaces of Femininity / Nochlin L. Why Have There Been no Great Female Artists

The line of sexism in the arts has been forever painted into our art history. Yet, this was not done by a painting or sculpture. This was made possible by two talented and acclaimed art historians by the names of Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock. These feminist art historians each pioneered their way into art history with a stroke of their pen - Nochlin's article, called *Why Have There Been no Great Female Artists*, published in *ARTnews* in January 1971, and Pollock's article called *Modernity and the spaces of Femininity*, published in 1988. These articles have had the biggest impact on the way art history's perception of women and the men that painted them. Which leads me to question, are these two articles just cynical representations of their authors? Or do their veracity of work make a compelling argument to why there are no great female artists?

Nochlin's article explores the taboo subject of equality between men and women. Not only in the art but also as a social faux pas. Nochlin suggestion that this problem is riddled with closed doors by the question itself. She states the question holds an unstated sexist under-tone. Her article explores many questions yet her opening remarks echo with each area that is covered. For example, she writes, "There are no great women artists because women are incapable of greatness."

Nochlin suggests that this statement is at the core of every so-called woman problem yet is falsified to hinder the topic. She goes on to explore this question just to find even more cynicism for her argument. She asks questions such as , "Why have there been no great female artists?" Then in her article

she expresses that just “by attempting to answer it, they tacitly reinforce its negative implications.” Implications that may hold back women from extending into a perceived social class of greatness.

Nochlin later attempts to empower her writing by justifying the difference between men and women in the arts by stating that “women artists are more inward-looking, more delicate and nuanced in their treatment of their medium.” Having a very subtle implication that men have always been incapable of such trivial tasks within the arts.

This shift in thinking was supported by contemporary feminists as a way to support a different way of thinking. This shift highlights the feminine style, going as far as to exploring how women have excelled in a new form of art by stating that there are differences between men and women. In her writing, she expresses this by saying "different both in its formal and its expressive qualities and based on the special character of women's situation and experience." Yet, Nochlin knew that this idea of a segregation of the sexes would only contribute to a bigger division between the sexes.

Understanding that the question was never how to distinguish between men and women artist, Nochlin proposed the following: “The problem lies not so much with some feminists' concept of what femininity is, but rather with their misconception-shared with the public at large of what art is.” She further expresses that art is “personal expression of individual emotional experience, a translation of personal life into visual terms.”With this description, Nochlin continues to bridge the gap on why there have been no great female artists. She additionally expresses that there has never been a historically great female artist because the times were different. However, this should not stop there from being one in the future.

Nochlin questioning why there been no great women artist is simply just the tip of the iceberg of misinterpretation and misconception as beneath lies a vast dark bulk of shaky ideas recues about the

nature of art. This topic is reinforced in and Pollock's article called Modernity and the spaces of Femininity which was published in 1988.

Pollock's article covers a wide range of paintings and painters that all in some way sheds light on the dark side of Nochlin's work. For instance, why have there been no great women artists? Pollock starts with Manet Olympia, which has been acknowledged as painted with the implied male viewer/consumer. Olympia is shown as a nude white woman lying on a bed being brought flowers by a black servant.

This work of art, even though painted nude, was said to be clothed with her sheer beauty by her male voyeurs and could be enjoyed by everyone - which Pollock argues was not the case. She states, "to recognize the gender-specific conditions of the painting's existence one needs only imagine a female spectator and a female producer of the works. How can a woman relate to the viewing positions proposed by these paintings?"

This statement implies that Pollock sees the works as unjust to women. She continues by asking, "can a woman be offered, in order to be denied..." referring to the way the woman has been painted. Yet, the tradition of painting a nude woman has long been celebrated by our society, not as a subject of sex but a signal of empowerment.

In Manet Olympia, which could be argued was modeled after Titian's Venus of Urbino, one can say Manet was just repainting a well-known painting with a modern twist. Manet strips away the academic value and replaces it with his own agenda. In doing so, Manet possesses a question that challenged the times with his depiction of the woman's body. Manet was at the same time empowering his subject by challenging the viewer by having Olympia gaze outward as if to judge the viewer.

Pollock's next attempt to solidify her point is to make reference to the abutment of brothel scenes that has been painted by none other than Pablo Picasso and other painters of their time. Pollock addresses the point of gender roles and classes. Pollock now questions why we do not see more art from women by

posing the question “if it is normal to see paintings of women's bodies as the territory across which men artists claim their modernity and compete for leadership of the avant-garde. Can we expect to rediscover paintings by women in which they battled with their sexuality in the representation of the male nude? “

Of course not. Which now turns her interest to the asymmetry in relation to language between men and women. She now finds that this asymmetry is more about the space in which each gender will occupy for example how and where each artist will paint. This space can be grasped in several dimensions from the subject matter to the space found in the painting all the way to where would you find this art displayed and how.

Both Nochlin and Pollock make a compelling case on the history of women in the arts. They both see a need for change in the arts. Without these pioneers the veil of equality may have never been lifted; a veil that needed to be addressed and now has been, eloquently. The stigma of women artist in the past can't be changed, yet now it can be understood. Nochlin said it the best by saying “What is important is that women face up to the reality of their history and their present situation, without making excuses or puffing mediocrity.”

As a student of the arts, you must understand two things: where we, as an artist, come from and that our future is unwritten - which means it is up to each one of us to make our mark, dot, stamp, stain, or endearment on this ever changing canvas. As for Nochlin and Pollock, their works have serviced as a moral compass to their craft.