

LINDA NOCHLIN ON FEMINISM THEN AND NOW

BY MAURA REILLY

MAURA REILLY: AT WHAT POINT IN YOUR LIFE DID YOU REALIZE THAT THERE WAS SUCH A THING AS INEQUALITY BETWEEN THE SEXES?

Linda Nochlin: I remember vividly my first act of proto-feminist critique in the realm of the visual. I must have been about six years old when I performed this act of desecration. Slowly and deliberately I poked out the eyes of Tinker Bell in an expensively illustrated edition of *Peter Pan*. I still remember my feeling of excitement as the sharp point pierced through those blue, long-lashed orbs. I hoped it hurt, and I was both frightened and triumphant looking at the black holes in the expensive paper. I hated Tinker Bell—her weakness, her sickening sweetness, her helplessness, her wispy, evanescent body (so different from my sturdy plump one), her pale hair, her plea to her audience to approve of her. I was glad I had destroyed her baby blues. I continued my campaign of iconoclasm with my first-grade reader—*Linda and Larry*, it was called, and Larry was about a head taller than Linda and always the leader in whatever banal activity the two were called on to perform. “See Larry run. See Linda run. Run, Larry, run. Run, Linda, run,” etc. I successfully amputated Larry’s head with blunt scissors on one page of the reader and cut off his legs on another: now they were equal and I was satisfied.

MR: IN JANUARY 1971, YOU PUBLISHED “WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO GREAT WOMEN ARTISTS?” IN A PIONEERING AND CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE OF ARTNEWS. WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE THIS NOW CANONICAL ESSAY?

LN: When I embarked on “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in 1970, there was no such thing as a feminist art history: like all other forms of historical discourse, it had to be constructed. New materials had to be sought out, a theoretical basis put in place, a methodology gradually developed.

MR: YOUR ESSAY “STARTING FROM SCRATCH” (PUBLISHED IN YOUR NEW BOOK, *WOMEN ARTISTS: THE LINDA NOCHLIN READER*, THAMES & HUDSON, 2015) CAPTURES BEAUTIFULLY WHAT APPEARED TO BE

A SENSE OF URGENCY ON THE PART OF LIBERATED WOMEN LIKE YOURSELF, AS YOU SOUGHT TO INTERVENE IN AND ALTER HISTORY ITSELF. BUT WAS THERE A SPECIFIC INCIDENT AROUND THAT TIME THAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE THAT ESSAY?

LN: I wrote [the essay] as the direct result of an incident that took place at Vassar graduation in 1970. Gloria Steinem was the graduation speaker...she had been invited by my friend Brenda Feigen, who was then a graduating senior. Her brother Richard Feigen was there. He was already a famous gallery person then, the head of the Richard Feigen gallery. After the ceremony, Richard turned to me and said, “Linda, I would love to show women artists, but I can’t find any good ones. Why are there no great women artists?” He actually asked me that question. I went home and thought about this issue for days. It haunted me. It made me think, because, first of all, it implied that there were no great women artists. Second, because it assumed this was a natural condition. It just lit up my mind. I am sure it was the catalyst that enabled me to put together a lot of things I had been thinking about, and stimulated me to do a great deal of further research in a variety of fields in order to “answer” the question and its implications, but his initial question started me off.

MR: THROUGHOUT YOUR SCHOLARSHIP OF THE 1970S, YOU MAINTAINED THAT, IN ADDITION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A REVISIONIST ART HISTORY, THERE WERE SEVERAL FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES THAT NEEDED TO BE ADDRESSED BEFORE FEMINISM IN THE ARTS COULD TRULY IMPLEMENT CULTURAL CHANGE. THE FIRST, OF COURSE, WAS THE NOTION OF “GREATNESS,” WHICH ITSELF MUST BE REDEFINED AS SOMETHING OTHER THAN WHITE, WESTERN, AND UNMISTAKABLY MALE. HAVE WE ACHIEVED THIS?

LN: I think the whole idea of “greatness” is out of date, as far as contemporary art is concerned, and rightly so. And so are single standards....I happen to think that women are now doing the most interesting and innovative work... and it is all quite different! No sign of a “female style”; no centralized imagery or necessary pattern and decoration, as some essentialist feminist art critics believed at the

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beginning of the women's movement. A wide range of mediums, genres, and styles marks women's work today. To me, this is what is important. Women can do what they want, the way they want.

MR: YOU'VE ALSO ARGUED THAT THE "FAULT" LIES NOT IN OUR HORMONES, BUT IN OUR INSTITUTIONS AND EDUCATION. HOW MUCH HAVE THESE CHANGED SINCE THE 1970S?

LN: It is undeniable that both institutions and education have changed a great deal. M.F.A. programs are now comprised of 60 percent women students. There are courses on women artists, feminism and art, contemporary women artists, etc., at major institutions of learning. This would have been unheard of in my day. And yet it is perhaps arguable that even today women have to struggle harder to get to the top, whatever the top is. Certainly, there are more shows by women artists in museums, especially university museums, than there used to be. But men still command the top prices at auctions and in general. But do I think top prices are the equivalent of important, interesting art? Jeff Koons costs more than Courbet; what does that tell us about relative value? But I have a feeling the art market is going to be biased for a long time, despite the heartening progress that 20th- and 21st-century women artists have made in university galleries, in publications, and in museums. The art market is in many ways still a boys' club, with men competing with other rich men to see who can pay the highest prices. Can we really judge the value of art, by men or women, by the crazy logic of the market? Is some of the stuff that goes for millions really "worth" that amount? This is a complicated question.

MR: THEN THERE CAN BE CHANGE, AFTER ALL?

LN: Yes, I think that there can be change. I've seen it. Education, exhibitions, and, in general, making women's presence felt as part of normal practice in fields like art and, we hope, science and medicine. I mean, who would have thought when I was a kid, many, many, many years ago, that almost half of our doctors and medical students would now be women?

MR: YOUR ADVICE FOR WOMEN ARTISTS TODAY?

LN: Don't be afraid. This is very important. Or, if you are afraid, keep it down. Keep your goals and what you have to do to achieve them in mind. One of the things I did in the '70s was to study men. It was very interesting. In general or in public, anyway, they can take criticism. They do not burst into tears; they do not get all upset. Men say some really cutting, critical things about one another and that is acceptable. A level of confidence and an ability to take criticism is essential to success. Women all too often are not brought up to take intellectual and professional criticism, harsh criticism.

MR: NOR ARE WOMEN BROUGHT UP TO HAVE A VOICE, TO SPEAK OUT AND UP.

LN: Precisely. Men are trained to talk up.

MR: AND AS A CLOSING STATEMENT...?

LN: At a time when certain patriarchal values are making a comeback—as they always do during times of war and stress—it is well to think of women as refusing their time-honored role as victims or supporters. It is time to rethink the bases of our position and strengthen them for the fight ahead. As a feminist, I fear this moment's overt reversion to the most blatant forms of patriarchy—a great moment for so-called "real men," like football players and politicians, to assert their sinister dominance over "others," primarily women and people of color—the return of the barely repressed. Masculine dominance in the art world fits into this structure, and we need to be aware of it. But I think this is a critical moment for feminism and women's place in the art world. . . . We need to be conscious not only of our achievements, but also of the dangers and difficulties lying in the future.

Kathleen Gilje, *Linda Nochlin in Manet's Bar at the Folies-Begère*, 2005.

A widely published writer on art and feminism, Linda Nochlin is the former Lila Acheson Wallace Professor of Modern Art at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. This is an edited excerpt of an interview that appears in Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader (Thames & Hudson, June 2015).

