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Debbie Nuno

California State University - San Bernardino

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Sexism in Art: from the Fundamentals to Art Critiques

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Art as a modern concept has come a very long way from the time of Renaissance art to today's global contemporary art. In regard to artistic practice, that which was once an act of painting or drawing now ranges (to name a few) from photography, mixed media, and new media to performance and digital art. Amongst the conventions and traditions are the well-known artists who make up the "canon" of art history including Michelangelo, Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, and Warhol. But how are women artists included in art history today? The evolution of art not only introduced new media into the art world but contributed through new art movements. The 1960s are known as the era of civil right movements and a decade of change for women. However, it was not until the late 1970s that the efforts made by the women of the 60s started to affect change in society and the discourse of art. The desire for gender equality in the arts was due to the injustices perceivable in the art institutions (and museums, in particular, that were run by, the wealthy, white, European, patriarchal ruling class), answering the question as to why women artists did not qualify for inclusion in the "canon" of art history.

Inequality in the art institution is a significant problem, and to state my argument pointedly, women are the main targets of unjust acts and these injustices demonstrate why the Feminist Art Movement exists in the first place. Sexism in almost every area of the arts has always been present, from the fundamentals of art exhibitions to the chauvinism found in art criticism. Women artists have always been linked to femininity and their womanhood, rather than being approached as simply an "artist" like their male counterparts. By focusing on Georgia O'Keeffe's work in conjunction with the presentation of historical evidence and facts by The Guerilla Girls, my study will track how society has viewed women artists since the beginning of the 1970s until present day, and by conducting this study, I will raise the question: "is there *still* sexism in art?" By raising this issue, my hope is that the reader will question why the art world works in this way and whether or not the art community has actually advanced and women can be considered as equal.

In her article titled *Between Poiesies and Praxis: Women and Art*, Francoise Collin explores the historical and social settings affecting women and their artmaking. One of the points that Collin makes is that throughout history women did not see themselves as potential artists and the reason for this is because the society in which women live, in the past and the present, tacitly communicated to them that art is only a skill that men are capable of achieving.¹ Women were also denied access to training in the arts which is a real reason why the canon of art history excludes them.

The inequality of power in our society is represented by the prevailing phallus symbol visualizing the domination of men which can be seen in architecture, traditional symbolism, and in pop-culture. These are places where the representation of women is

nonexistent unless otherwise linked to sexual objectification. Collin explains how power is an issue in her discussion about the way in which the absence of women in politics and decision-making in society goes hand in hand with “why there been no great women artists,” the question that Linda Nochlin famously raised in 1971.² It is important to remember that society was politically founded by men and therefore was created to accommodate and favor the male gender.

In her essay titled, “Feminist Art Education: An Analysis of the Women’s Art Movement as an educational force,” Renee Sandell provides historical information on the Women’s Art Movement. Sandell establishes how women’s art did not become accessible in quantity until the 1970s.³ The accessibility of women’s art brought forth two effects: “One is that women artist could begin to work knowingly in relation to the work of other women: the other is that the traditional question – are men’s and women’s art different? – could be discussed again.”⁴ Although the first effect is important, the second effect is vital and should be discussed thoroughly. Those in charge of the existing art structures in society are those who typically decide what art is and whether it is considered “good” enough to be shown in an exhibition. Members of western society almost inevitably judge one another, and since art pertains to the experience of human beings, the act of judging and evaluating artworks is therefore natural. Women have continuously been viewed as inferior and lesser to men, therefore, it has been presumed that they cannot become good artists, or create something that is “good enough” to be seen by the public. And because art is considered a freedom of expression, women were not to be viewed as artists nor were they allowed to express themselves. Women artists were seen as a threat. Sandell suggests that “the artistic heritage as we know it, has been contributed by male dominators.”⁵ She then goes on to explain that although art training for women has been limited, women found a form of expression through crafts but unlike fine art, crafts are considered to be a minor form of art.

Art historian Nochlin as previously mentioned argues that another reason why women’s art is considered lesser or minor is because “there is a different kind of ‘greatness’ for women’s art than for men’s thereby postulating the existence of a distinctive and recognizable feminine style, different both in its formal and its expressive qualities and based on the special character of women’s situation and experience.”⁶ This means that a woman’s artwork is considered lesser because femininity is tied to it, and femininity is a weak characteristic in western society. To suggest that a woman’s artwork is different or not worth being exhibited due to its supposed femininity is an invalid argument. Nochlin states that, “men who yearn to fulfill themselves through what are often termed ‘feminine’ artistic interests can find themselves as painters or sculptors, rather than as volunteer museum aides or part-time ceramists, as their female counter parts.”⁷ She also mentions that “it is certainly not realistic to hope that a majority of men, in the arts or in another field, will soon see the light and find that it is in their own self-interest to grant complete equality to women, those who have privilege inevitably hold on to it.”⁸ The problem is in the social unconscious and not determined on the conscious level.

Sexism in art can also be seen in art criticisms of women's artwork written by men. I will focus on Artist Georgia O'Keeffe and her artwork in order to shine a light on this problem. In his case study on *Sexist Art Criticism*, art historian Hall Mitchell presents a collection of comments and statements on Georgia O'Keeffe and her artwork made by others. Mitchell points out that the comments made by men are more personal and directed toward her as a woman rather than toward her art. He also shows how comments made by women are actually about O'Keeffe's artwork, therefore concluding that there are indeed "gender based interpretations for women's art."⁹ A clear example is a statement by art critic Samuel Kootz. "Much of her earlier work showed a womanly preoccupation with sex, and uneasy selection of phallic symbols in her flowers, a delight in their nascent qualities, O'Keeffe was being a woman and only secondarily and artist."¹⁰ Paul Rosenfeld defines O'Keeffe as someone "who shows no traces of intellectualization and has a mind born of profoundest feelings," while Lewis Wilson "She is the poet of womanhood in all its phases: the search for the lover, the reception of the lover, the states longing for the child, the shrinkage and the blackness of the emotions, when the erotic thread has been lost, the sudden effulgence of feeling, as if the stars have begun to flower, which comes through sexual fulfillment in love: all these elements are the subjects of her paintings."¹¹

This last statement does not only tie Georgia O'Keeffe to femininity but it generalizes all women when discussing "womanhood." Wilson suggests that every individual who identifies himself or herself as a woman are emotional and judged with a negative connotation. Wilson also discusses women always in relation to a man and in connection with a lover, not according to their individuality. This statement insinuates that women need lovers in order to fulfill their emotional needs and feel whole.

Thomas Larson also discusses feelings in relation to Georgia O'Keeffe. However, Larson's experience is personal and denotes the idea that many others have made about "O'Keeffe's artwork being tied to femininity," explaining that on his visit to the Georgia O'Keeffe museum in Santa Fe there was an informative video playing throughout the exhibition. The video consists of O'Keeffe speaking about her own artwork, making statements along the lines of "I liked this interesting rock formation, so I painted it and didn't care what people thought I should paint. I only painted what I felt passionate about."¹² To Larson O'Keeffe's artwork related to emotions because he saw how her paintings affected the public. By observing how other people viewed the exhibition he questioned: "why haven't we looked this closely at her work before?"¹³ Larson answers his own question by stating that the audience "has been distracted by the art world's deification of her and the self-curio of a woman whose own image is nowhere present in her paintings." – there is an enigma tied to O'Keeffe, which is "to be known for having worked so many years and less for the body of work itself."¹⁴ Larson suggests that she is defined by her experience in the sexist art world and the relation of her famous photographer husband Alfred Stieglitz.

Larson makes the statement that her work appears simple due to the absence of the human body, and simplicity confuses people because they do not have much to work with so they automatically connect it to her womanhood. It is important to note that O'Keeffe lived in New Mexico, where she spent much of her time working. Being

surrounded by nature in its entirety is what led her to paint many landscapes, skulls, and flowers. O'Keeffe was painting what she loved which was nature, and an example of O'Keeffe's love for nature can be seen in her painting *Summer Days*, 1887-1986. Those who viewed the exhibition in the Santa Fe museum along with Larson were unquestionably able to absorb O'Keeffe's passion through her artwork, thus possibly adding to their own definition of her artwork through emotion, which isn't necessarily connected to womanhood. After all, everyone sees and experiences things differently.

Going back to the claim that a woman's artwork and artistic production is distinctive because of femininity, San MacColl examines the concepts of universality and difference in art. To MacColl, a difference in the practices of women artists (as opposed to men) can be understood through the subject of variability and gracefulness as expressed in their artwork. It is the many different subjects or objects that women present to the public that appear to restrict their voice yet at the same time makes their art unique. MacColl appears to be suggesting that men are afraid to let themselves be known, and therefore their artistic production is universal and their distinctive style relies not on difference but on their inability to paint what they really feel. MacColl states that Georgia O'Keeffe succeeded in presenting her voice through her artwork by "carving out her own identity within a dominantly male field."¹⁵

To discuss universality within the discourse of art MacColl touches on a statement previously articulated by Judy Chicago who states that "being a woman and being an artist spelled only one thing: pain."¹⁶ MacColl uses Chicago's statement to point out that if art is universal then women would not feel pain or the sense of being "incompatible" with the art world. Women would not be depicted in the kinds of subjects of art that often result in objectification. MacColl argues that O'Keeffe has made an impact on the discourse of art because "she has made her own space as an outsider; by working independently and her work challenges the norms of her field."¹⁷ MacColl goes on to suggest that she is also "explicit in the ideal of gender-free work."¹⁸ This concept is supported by O'Keeffe's statements in which she says, "I have always been very annoyed at being referred to as 'a woman artist' rather than an 'artist'."¹⁹

Other statements made by O'Keeffe reflecting her outlook on being an artist are found in the Guerrilla Girls scrapbook. O'Keeffe states that "the men liked to put me down as the best woman painter. I think I'm one of the best painters" and, "I hate flowers - I paint them because they're cheaper than models and they don't move."²⁰ As Sandell argues, the Women's Art Movement helped to raise the question regarding why women and their artwork were not exhibited until the late 70s. However, that is not the only thing that the women's art movement did. Based on feminism and a desire for equality both in society and in art, The Guerrilla Girls (one of the many activists in the women's art movements) helped to shine a light on the sexism that not only occurs in art criticism but in many fields of art. They did this by questioning, "do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?... When racism and sex are no longer fashionable, what will your art collection be worth?"²¹ And by making statements such as "what do women want? They want the human to be neither man nor woman," the Guerrilla Girls gave voice to the sexist problem in art.²²

Although it is apparent that there is sexism in art, there are a few scholars, commentators, historians, and writers who openly admit there is a problem. The reason that there is not much evidence on whether “sexism in art” is because men who declare that it is a fiction are already powerful figures in the institutions of art, and they do not feel the need to write about a problem they do not think exists. Nor do they feel the need to even acknowledge that inequality in the art world exists. The answer to: “Is there still sexism in art?” is sadly yes, and as summed up by Nochlin’s words, she concludes “that the total situation in 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 social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast.”²³ Sexism in art still exists but ever since the activists of the Feminist Art Movement have been exposing and presenting to the public the inequalities that exist in the art world, things have progressed and will continue to do so. If we as a society want a faster solution to the inequalities that exist in society, then we should start by changing the ways in which children are taught and raised. Books and school lessons should include more women in prominent positions of all disciplines and fields – from science to art. This will allow children to grow up knowing that women can also hold a position of both power and prestige in engineering, medicine, politics, and especially, in the arts.

1. Francoise Collin, “Between Poiesis and Praxis: Women and Art,” *Diogenes*, Vol.57, No.1 (2010), 83-92.
2. Linda Nochlin, “Why Have there been no great women artist?” *Art News* 69 (January 1971), reprinted in *Women, Art, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988),145-78.
3. Renee Sandell, “Feminist Art Education: An Analysis of the Women's Art Movement as an Educational Force,” *Studies in Art Education*, 1979. 20, No. 2, 18-28.
4. Ibid, Sandell, *Feminist Art Education*, 18.
5. Ibid,19.
6. Linda Nochlin, “Why Have there been no great women artist?” *Art News*, Vol. 69 (January 1971), reprinted in Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988),145-78.
7. Ibid,148.
8. Ibid,152.
9. Marylyn Hall Mitchell, “Sexist Art Criticism: Georgia O’Keeffe: A Case Study” *Chicago Styles*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1978), 681-687.
10. Mitchell, *Sexist Art Criticism*, 682.
11. Ibid, 682, 683.
12. Thomas Larson “Skull and Roses: Reflections on Enshrining Georgia O’Keeffe” *Southwest Review*. (1998) 83, no. 1, 9.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid, 10.

15. San MacColl, "Universality and Difference: O'Keefe and McClintock" *Hypatia*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1990), 149.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid, 152.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. The Guerrilla Girls, *The Guerilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (NY: Penguin Books, 1998).
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have there been no great women artist?" *Art News* 69 (January 1971), reprinted in *Women, Art, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988),145-78.