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Bruno, Cari, "Where Do Women In Art Stand Now?" (2023). *Art 525/Art History 5290 Papers*. 13.
<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/art-history-papers/13>

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Where Do Women In Art Stand Now?

Cari Bruno

AH5290 Art History Conference

May 7, 2023

This paper will analyze Linda Nochlin's *"Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"* Breaking down the article and how it relates to the abstract expressionist female artists of the mid 20th century in New York, specifically The 9th Street Women—focusing on the historiography of the exclusion of women from art history, beginning with Vasari then progressing to analyze Nochlin's later work and addressing the continuation of a patriarchal bias in the art world. Looking at where women in art history started, the obstacles we have overcome through movements, such as the Guerilla Girls and their fight for equality, and the initial phase of feminism, or "white feminism," and how that feminism has progressed to be more inclusive. Additionally, this paper will investigate where women artists stand now regarding equity and equality in not just access to galleries, exhibitions, and museums but also in terms of sales and financial equality to analyze progress, what still needs to be done, and how we can get there.

Nochlin's article makes many groundbreaking and revolutionary observations about the obstacles that women and anyone other than wealthy white Eurocentric male artists face in the pursuit of greatness in the field of art. But there are many claims or reasons for the lack of "great" women artists that need evaluation for accuracy and a deeper inspection of what exactly is and has been holding women artists back from achieving said "greatness." For example, the concept that women artists were barred from proper education and lack of access to "humanist circles," free exchange of ideas, good relationships with patrons, comprehensive and free travel, or the ability to run their factories may have been valid in the 19th century but no longer true during the 20th century. Expressly, in relation to a group of female abstract artists based in New York in the time leading up to and after WWII referred to as the 9th St. Women. The 9th Street Women, Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler, and Joan Mitchell specifically, had the advantages necessary to overcome obstacles to success that

burdened their predecessors. Yet, they could not gain critical and financial success during their time. These artists had access to every attribute that Nochlin said they needed to achieve "greatness," yet none were deemed "great"? The continued struggle of female artists for equality and equity will be the paper's primary focus, digging deep to understand the progress made and what still holds women artists back.

In Linda Nochlin's infamous essay "*Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*" (1971), Nochlin extends a historiography of women artists excluded from the Western canon of art history and the obstacles that they, among others, have faced in their efforts to achieve "greatness" in the field of art. According to Nochlin, female artists were "deprived of encouragement, educational facilities, and rewards"¹ in the forms of education, tutors, and, importantly, the "nude," which, according to her argument, was a vital component of an artist's educational process. Nochlin went on to address many other areas that women artists were hindered by when she mentions that women artists historically were not able to establish relationships that were "intimate with members of humanist circles with whom he(he) could exchange ideas, establish suitable relationships with patrons, (or) travel widely and freely"² or have the ability or "acumen" to establish or run a significant artistic factory. She notes that women artists have historically struggled to achieve "greatness" because they "are often weakened by the internalized demands of the male-dominated society itself."³ Nochlin also explains that the term "greatness" was created by and specifically for the bourgeoisie, heterosexual, white patriarchal demographic. She then talks about what is deemed to be the

¹ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" In *Women, Art, and Power* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 155.

² Nochlin, "Why", 158.

³ Nochlin, "Why", 151.

"natural" order when she states that "we tend to accept whatever is as natural."⁴ She explains that not only does the concept of "woman, seen as an "outsider,"" disadvantage the woman but that "the white-male-position-accepted-as-natural" creates "a decided advantage"⁵ for men. In other words, for women to become great artists, they would have to overcome the obstacles systemically set up against them and somehow overcome the advantages inherent to their male counterparts. This paper will highlight how the 9th Street Women and Guerilla Girls overcame many of these obstacles, the effects this created, and the potential reasons they still did not achieve widespread "greatness."

To trace where the exclusion of women in art history began, I will go to the formal beginning of the discipline. Giorgio Vasari has been canonized as the first art historian and author of the first art history book, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, published in 1550. While living in Florence, Italy, Vassari had access to outstanding women artists such as Properzia de Rossi, Sister Plautilla Nelli, Sofonisba Anguissola, Madonna Lucrezia, and more. Despite this, he featured and discussed only one female artist in his book. The only female artist given "extended analysis" by Vassari was sculptor Properzia De' Rossi. During his analysis of De' Rossi, Vasari stated "she would have done marvelous things if she had enjoyed, as men do, advantages for studying, devoting herself to drawing, and copying living and natural objects."⁶ While describing her works, he used terms such as grace, subtlety, and delicacy. When representing male sculptors of the time, Vasari chose words with more masculine connotations, such as magnificent, useful, and honorable. The chapter on De' Rossi is

⁴ Nochlin, "Why", 145.

⁵ Nochlin, "Why", 145.

⁶ Giorgio Vassari, "Madonna Properzia De' Rossi," *In The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2007), 304.

short, only five pages long; within those five pages, he briefly mentions other female artists of his time, such as Sister Plautilla Nelli, Madonna Lucrezia, and Sofonisba Anguissola.

Other women mentioned by Vasari are featured only as footnotes in his five pages dedicated to women. All of these women were very successful and talented artists in their own time despite their scant inclusion by Vasari in this chapter. Most of their works are still highly acclaimed and valuable, ironically, many men Vasari wrote about have drifted into obscurity. One such acclaimed female artist is Sister Plautilla Nelli. Sister Plautilla's work was held in high esteem during her lifetime, so much so that Vasari noted that "in the houses of gentlemen throughout Florence, there are so many [of Nelli's] pictures, that it would be tedious to attempt to speak of them all."⁷ Unfortunately, as time passed, her name was forgotten by history until the A.W.A. (Advancing Women Artists Foundation) began restoring and re-discovering her catalog. The A.W.A. convinced the Uffizi Museum to exhibit Sister Plautilla's work in 2017. Unfortunately, although The Uffizi still possesses many of her paintings and code illuminations, none are permanently displayed in the museum. Another famous female artist of the time is Judith Jans Leyster. She was a Dutch painter during their "Golden Age" of painting. Her works included portraits and still lifes and were, like Sister Plautilla's works, also highly respected and appreciated by her contemporaries. Unfortunately for Leyster, she was almost wholly forgotten after her death, and all her works were attributed to other male artists. These women artists' stories are reminiscent of artists such as 9th Street artists; Lee Krasner and Grace Hartigan's popularity during their time and the subsequent diminishment of their careers in history.

The female artists during Vasari's time were not the only highly acclaimed and sought-after female artists to have been appreciated and forgotten. A few female artists that come to

⁷ Vasari, "Lives", 301.

mind from other eras are Artemisia Gentilleschi (Italy 1593-1656), Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (French 1755-1842), Mary Cassatt (American 1844-1926), Louise Bourgeois (French, 1911-2010). The list above is a brief example of predominantly white (European) female artists. There are countless other unknown female artists worldwide whose history hasn't been unearthed. So, how did these female artists who struggled with so many obstacles achieve the success they did? One theory to explain their success goes back to Vasari and his stories of the myth of the Great Artist. Perhaps they were allowed their accomplishments because they had some mythical story about their talent swirling around them. Maybe they were allowed their success because they were just singular women here and there and didn't present as a threat to the art world's status quo. Vasari implies as much himself when he says that the female artists were "too proud to set themselves with their little hands, so tender and so white, as if to rest from us the palm of supremacy."⁸ Another theory about the women who achieved some success in art and art history is that these women fell into socially normative or "acceptable" categories. There were a small set of categories determined under Western patriarchy that dictated what was acceptable for women to participate in. The three primary categories included in this were nun, exceptionally educated noblewomen, and a creative, born into a family of wealth. Whatever the reason for their success, either fitting into one of the three categories or just being a "one off" talented female artist, they were expected to adhere to the societal expectation of virtue, piety, and submissiveness to God and the men in their lives. If, in any way, they didn't meet societal expectations, their careers were derailed.

Again, referencing the obstacles Nochlin states that women as artists had to overcome to achieve success; access to proper training (including the nude), the ability to network with

⁸ Vasari, "Lives", 302.

influential people, set up and run their studios, and "act like a man," among other things. So, let's look at these obstacles concerning the group of female artists in reference to "*The Ninth Street Women*". These women placed themselves at the heart of the art world in New York in the years leading up to WWII when esteemed and influential artists and members of the art world poured into New York to escape the rising tensions in Europe. They were making sacrifices, not having children, cooking, or doing traditional "women's work." According to the book *Ninth Street Women*, they had access to the best art education and training, they knew, and sometimes were the press, and yet today, with all we have learned about them and how much their work still endures, their work isn't valued at auction for anywhere near the same prices as their male counterpart. One example is artist Lee Krasner, she was active in the art scene in the 1940s and gained quite a reputation. Of all the women artists mentioned above, Krasner is the only one who put love over work and pulled back from her career to support and promote her husband, Jackson Pollock. When asked why she put her career on hold, Krasner stated, "I couldn't suddenly not be a woman, not be in love."⁹ Much to the dismay of her friends in the art world who felt that Krasner was a much better artist than Pollock and that it was a massive waste of talent for her to remain dormant in her career," her friend Lillian Kiesler said, watching the process was like watching a "ballerina being diminished, that here was this great star. Jackson was nothing to us."¹⁰ This statement leads us to the point that Nochlin made in her *Women Art and Power* article. Nochlin discusses the pressure women in society feel to conform to certain societal norms and that they, on some level, have even bought into said stereotypes when she says, "The need to comply, to be inwardly at one with the patriarchal order and its discourses, is

⁹ Mary Simpson, "Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: five painters and the movement that changed modern art," (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2018), 115.

¹⁰ Simpson, "Ninth Street", 118.

compelling,"¹¹ and that "symbolic power is invisible and can be exercised only with the complicity of those who fail to recognize either that they submit to it or that they exercise it."¹² I feel that Krasner is an excellent example of a female artist who bought into the societal ideals of what it means to be a woman and a partner and sacrificed her potential "greatness" in the process.

However, the other female artists in this group had all of the opportunities that Nochlin said they should have when she said, "It is only by adopting, however covertly, the "masculine" attributes of single-mindedness, concentration, tenaciousness, and absorption in ideas and craftsmanship for their own sake that women have succeeded, and continue to succeed, in the world of art."¹³ But what does success mean? As stated before, these women overcame Nochlin's obstacles and followed her guidelines for success before her article *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* So, if they had been considered "great" or "succeeded," Nochlin wouldn't have needed to write her article. Is Nochlin saying they too were complicit in their lack of "success"?

According to author John Paul Rollert in his Essay, *Recovery Work: Nathaniel Kahn's The Price of Everything and Mary Gabriel's Ninth Street Women*, the definition of success is that "The only way to make sure that cultural artifacts survive is for them to have a commercial value."¹⁴ Without commercial value, there can be no "success" in a Capitalist world economy. In his essay, he also references the 9th Street Women and how, despite their sharing of ideas with

¹¹ Linda Nochlin, "Women Art and Power," *In Women, Art, and Power*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 3.

¹² Nochlin, "Women", 2.

¹³ Nochlin, "Why", 163.

¹⁴ John Paul Rollert, "Recovery Work: Nathaniel Kahn's the Price of Everything and Mary Gabriel's Ninth Street Women," *Modernism/modernity* Vol.28, No.2 (2021), 377.

their "male counterparts" and the fact that they were included entirely in exhibits and had inroads with the press, their work suddenly became invisible. He made it clear that he feels that "there can not be equality in a capitalistic commercially driven art market unless female artists' products are financially valued as equal or near equal to their male counterparts."¹⁵

So far, Nochlin and her essays have given us much to unpack regarding women artists throughout history, what obstacles they have encountered, and what is necessary to succeed. We also dissected her suggestions and saw examples of female artists doing everything "right" before Nochlin's article was published but still hadn't achieved success or "greatness." Nochlin herself reflected on her original article in an article published 30 years after the first one titled *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists, 30 Years After*. In this piece, Nochlin notes the progress made by female artists during the 30 years by first reminding us that feminist art history has only truly existed since 1970. She notes that women artists are having a more significant effect on their male counterparts, and in art. She also points out that there "has been a change away from "phallic "greatness" to making work that is provocative, impactive, innovative, and making one's voice heard."¹⁶ She finishes this article by reminding everyone that we have a long way to go and that "We need our wit and courage to make sure that women's voices are heard, their work seen and written about. That is our task for the future."¹⁷ In the thirty years since the first article was published, women like the Guerilla Girls have in fact been using their "wit and courage" to make their voices heard, so why hasn't there been more progress?

¹⁵ Rollert, "Recovery", p281.

¹⁶ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists, 30 Years After," *In Women Artists at the Millennium*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011).p102.

¹⁷ Nochlin, "Why 30 years", 104.

Let's look at what these outspoken and witty women did during the last thirty years to gauge whether the problem is a lack of trying on women's parts to be seen and heard, or whether the problem is more systemically patriarchal. One of the most well-known groups of feminist activists in the art world is the Guerilla Girls. The Guerilla Girls is an art collective that began as a group of 7 women artists who came together in 1985 to protest against the systematic exclusion of women artists from prominent galleries and museums in New York. Their influences were powerful, outspoken women such as Lucy Lippard, who, in the 1970s, began protesting what she believed was a flawed system that just added women into the existing (broken) art system. A defining moment that spurred the formation of the Guerilla Girls is when The Museum of Modern Arts hosted an exhibition titled, *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*. The exhibition was advertised as "a survey of the most important contemporary art and artists in the world," but out of the 169 artists in the exhibit, only 13 were women. Motivated by the acknowledgement of the claims that 1970s feminism was "man-hating and humorless." They decided that they wanted to create a movement or voice that spoke to a younger audience of women through the use of "wit and laughter."¹⁸ Their tactics mirrored Nochlin's recommendation for the advancement of women in the art world when she said, "We need our wit and courage to make sure that women's voices are heard, their work seen and written about."¹⁹ The weird thing is that this is what Nochlin prescribed in 2011, 26 years after the Guerilla Girls had begun doing just that.

The Guerilla Girls' fought against the inequality in the highly male-centered museums and art galleries in New York and then across the country. Through their use of large and provocative billboards, newspaper articles, and "report cards" tallying up the number of female

¹⁸ "Feminist Art Criticism." *Feminist art criticism*, (2017), 1.

¹⁹ Nochlin, "Why 30 Years," 104.

artists' exhibitions compared to male artists exhibitions, they shone a spotlight on said inequality. One exciting topic the Guerilla Girls drew attention to is the question of the "nude" that Nochlin herself had mentioned. Noting that women were not allowed to learn from nude models because it would have been improper. Yet, the museums are filled with images of naked or half-naked women as "subjects." The Guerilla Girls shining a light on the hypocrisy, stated that it was "an interesting commentary on rules of propriety: that is, it is all right for a ("low," of course) woman to reveal herself naked-as-an object for a group of men, but forbidden to a woman to participate in the active study and recording of naked-man-as-an-object or even of a fellow woman."²⁰

While the Guerilla Girls were drawing attention to the lack of equality for women in the established art world, they were not without their flaws. It is essential to point out what Nochlin reminded us of when she said, "We all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class, and above all, male."²¹ Many critics of the group were quick to point out that their brand of feminism was purely "white feminism" and their collective itself was primarily white and already "mirrored" the art world demographics. The group itself didn't meet the demands for diversity that they were making of other institutions. Feminism in the 1980s was based on exclusivity and did little to help an inclusive female artist. Critics noted that feminism needed inclusion to be an authentic "feminist" movement.

So, where do women stand now regarding equality in the art field? In 2013 Micol Hebron conducted a *Gallery Tally Project* to examine gender imbalance in the art world. Hebron pointed

²⁰ Nochlin, "Why" 157.

²¹ Nochlin, "Why" 149.

out that according to her initial data retrieval of just single artist ads placed in a highly regarded art magazine, 70-90 percent were placed on behalf of male artists. She makes a very insightful point when she states that these ads, brochures, and catalogs create a type of historicization and validation of said artists, which the absence of documentation, in turn, leaves a massive gap in the historical art history records of the women artists practicing and creating during any specific time in history. The implication made by the galleries representing these male artists is that women aren't interested in being artists. To counter that point, Hebron tells us that the "research shows that 70 – 80 percent of the student body in B.F.A. programs in Southern California, and 65 – 70 percent of M.F.A. programs in Southern California are made up of women,"²² and that these numbers translate equivalently across the country. So if the majority of students are female artists working to get their M.F.A.s, it is safe to assume that they want their work seen and purchased. Hebron goes on to ask a question similar to the one posed by this essay when she queries, "How is it that in 2014, the numbers regarding female artists in the gallery system are only marginally better than they were when the Guerilla Girls began counting in the 1980s? And the stats for artists of color are worse still."²³

Based on the data provided about the obstacles that women must overcome to become "great" artists and the discussion of how in so many cases, they have overcome those obstacles and yet still not achieved equality, this article speculates as to what may be (at least one) answer to why there have been no great women artists. It may just be patriarchy and the patriarchal system in the art world. According to author M. Reilly in her piece *Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes*, "The more closely one examines art-world statistics, the more

²² Micol Hebron, "The Gallery Tally Poster; Project A Call for Gender Equity in the Art;World." *The Brooklyn Rail*, (2014),1.

²³ Hebron, "The Gallery," 1.

glaringly obvious it becomes that, despite decades of postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer activism and theorizing, the majority continues to be defined as white, Euro-American, heterosexual, privileged, and, above all, male."²⁴ Writers Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, in their essay "*Feminism*" *In Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods*, state that "It is not simply that patriarchy erects certain obstacles to hinder women but that society is founded on sexist structures. If women had had access to the nude or other education, their work would still have been viewed as inferior, since men control meaning."²⁵ All talk of a patriarchal system keeping female artists from achieving equality sounds a bit like a conspiracy theory. Still, comedian George Carlin said it most concisely when he said, "You don't need a formal conspiracy when interests converge..... they have like interests; they don't need to call a meeting; they know what's good for them."²⁶

Many essays imply that the obstacles women must overcome are created, and if they are created, they have probably always been created. Therefore, they can be modified and adjusted to continue the exclusionary practices of the art world in favor of the white-male system that has always been in place. So, assuming patriarchy is what is preventing women artists from achieving "greatness," what exactly would that look like? Reilly tells us that it comes in the form of museum staff made up of "senior management, predominantly male, had a stranglehold on the institutions, often preventing them from instituting substantive change."²⁷ She also discusses discrimination issues towards women, including "press coverage, exhibitions, auction prices, and

²⁴ Maura Reilly, "Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures and Fixes," *Art News*, (2015),.1.

²⁵ Michael Hatt, Klonk, "Feminism," *In Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 153.

²⁶ Films for Action, *Films For Action*, (2014),18-:23.

²⁷ Reilly, "Taking", 1.

representation at galleries."²⁸ Hatt and Klonk cited 9th St. artist Helen Frankenthaler when her work was described as "inherently feminine"²⁹ no matter what it looked like simply because a woman made it and therefore "less than" a piece of art, any piece of art created by a man. It seems that we won't be able to achieve equality until we can change the white-male-centric way of thinking and acting in the art world.

Considering all these reasons why it is so difficult for women artists to achieve "greatness," let us look at where they stand now. According to the *Gallery Tally* project, as of 2014, at all of "the major art auctions, women bring in \$0.12 to the dollar compared to their male counterparts,"³⁰ and, as of 2017, writers F.Y.R.P. Bocart, M. Gertsberg, & R.A.J Pownall, state in their market analysis; *An Empirical Analysis of Price Differences for Male and Female Artists in the Global Art Market*, give some not so encourage statistics when they note that "female artists remain a small fraction of the overall market in terms of both volume (4.2%) and value (5.0%)."³¹ An interesting fact that they address is that female artists sell more when their art has a more "female characteristic."³² If we take a look at the images from the Guerilla Girls and Pussy Galore's updated report card and from the Tally Report poster image, we can see that the number of women artists being featured in prominent galleries still only equates to an average of around 13%. As far as sales at auction go, though, according to the article, there is a bit of encouraging data, that is that female artists are beginning to show an increase in sales and market value of their work, primarily modern artists' work, but they are still just a tiny percent of overall

²⁸ Reilly, "Taking", 1.

²⁹ Hatt, "Feminism", 154.

³⁰ Hebron, "The Gallery", 1.

³¹ Rollert, "Recovery Work", 380.

³² Rollert, "Recovery Work", 380.

sales and, that female artists are finally starting to set record sale prices for their work. They expect the trend to continue rising.

If we go back to Nochlin's article, "*Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*," we have to compare the reasons that Nochlin gave for why she believed there hadn't been any "great" women artists with the artists known as the 9th Street Women. Nochlin pointed out many valid reasons that there hadn't been any "great" women artists in history but failed to mention the 9th Street Women, who were a contradiction to the obstacles Nochlin had given for the lack of success of women artists. However, her article says an interesting concept that may be the most on-point and vital to our discussion. She mentions the concept of the social order regarding the traditionally white-male patriarchal system in the field of art designed for those in power to hold onto that power, creating additional systemic obstacles for women artists to overcome throughout history. Nochlin points out that "the role that the social order plays in all of this"³³ is profound. She states, "Those who have privileges inevitably hold on to them, and hold tight, no matter how marginal the advantage involved, until compelled to bow to superior power of one sort or another."³⁴ As mentioned above, this concept may be the most profound of all the ideas in Nochlin's paper. According to Nochlin, recognizing that anyone "who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class, and above all, male,"³⁵ may be the key to why there have been no "great" women artists and why women artists are still struggling to reach equality and parity in the art world to this day.

Nochlin may have inadvertently answered her own question. If the white male patriarchy continues to create obstacles to overcome for women artists, then her first paper and her

³³ Nochlin, "Why" 151.

³⁴ Nochlin, "Why" 150.

³⁵ Nochlin, "Why" 149.

hypothesis were correct at the time. Unfortunately for women and minority artists, the obstacles keep changing. The 9th Street Women overcame one set of obstacles: access, education, etc. The Guerilla Girls overcame a different set of obstacles by broadening the scope and definition of feminism and using their "wit" to challenge the system, only to continually have the obstacles change again. Now we are at the point where we are working to have more women in place at higher levels of museums and galleries. We are gaining visibility and access, but the value or parity of the art still isn't equitable. With the worldwide art market growing into countries still severely patriarchal and inequitable towards women, such as China and Dubai, the obstacles to success have been changed again. Unfortunately, the question of how women and people of color get to a place of equality and equity in the art world still doesn't seem to have an answer. All we know is that the obstacles keep changing, and we continue to modify our strategy and change with them.

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