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NINE

White Walls, Glass Ceiling

In May 1984, the Museum of Modern Art celebrated its expansion with "An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture," a massive show organized by Kynaston McShine. It was billed as a summation of the challenging breadth of contemporary art; a press release boasted that the "Survey" would "reveal the high quality and extraordinary vitality of recent artistic production in acknowledging a variety of works by a younger generation of artists" and "impart a sense of the great diversity and individualism that is prevalent in today's artistic output."[1]

Today, these grand claims are all but forgotten; McShine's initiative is better remembered for what it didn't contain than for what it did. For of the "195 works, all made since 1975, by 165 artists from 17 countries" that it advertised, only thirteen were by women. Coming on the heels of the feminist art surge of the 1970s, this manifest *lack* of diversity triggered a wave of anger. The show was picketed. More enduringly, the incident sparked the creation of the art collective known as the Guerrilla Girls, who became known in subsequent years for dogged and humorous graphics pointing out the bias of museums and galleries, as well as their ingenious device of wearing gorilla masks to provide the group's members with the freedom of anonymity and to draw attention to their actions. (In 1989, they released what is perhaps their most famous graphic, aimed at the Metropolitan Museum. It featured a nude odalisque in a gorilla mask beneath the words, "Do women have to be naked to get into U.S. museums?" The text explained, "Less than 2% of the artists in the Met. Museum are women, but 83% of the nudes are female.")[2]

Today, the Guerrilla Girls' biting feminist agitprop is considered among the most important art that came out of the eighties. It is highlighted in most textbooks and in the permanent collections of many of the museums that they protested and is generally admired for its courage and wit. The Guerrilla Girls are part of art history. It is all the more striking, then, that the problem they addressed remains very much present with us today.

Two decades later, in 2005, PS1 Contemporary Art Center—a satellite of MoMA—held its second "Greater New York" show, a once-every-five-years survey that is supposed to bring together whatever important new trends are percolating from the city's art scene (not unlike McShine's long-ago "Survey"). The opening festivities were marked, once again, by a protest: Four women stood, wearing spiky pink wigs, outside the institution, silently pointing and generally making a spectacle of themselves. This collective, which called itself the Brainstormers, had taken it upon themselves literally to "point out" how women made up only slightly more than a third of the figures represented in this potentially career-making survey.[3] That total represented some progress from the disgraceful days of the mid-eighties, but was certainly far from satisfactory. In fact, it was kind of shocking.

Like the Guerrilla Girls before them, the Brainstormers used the raw outrage of simple statistics as their medium. In a pamphlet accompanying their action, they noted that women now made up more than half of students entering art schools—that year, at New York's School of Visual Arts, 71 men enrolled in graduate studies in the fall, compared to 134 women—yet less than one third of solo shows in Chelsea, the epicenter of New York's commercial art world, featured women.[4]

Like the picketing of the MoMA in 1984, the Brainstormers' modest gesture of artistic activism had larger ripple effects. It was written and blogged about. In subsequent years it became fashionable to a certain extent to report on the male/female ratio in big group shows like the Whitney Biennial, and major museums have made some gestures toward checking bias. When "Greater New York" returned in 2010, the percentage of women in it was up to forty-three.[5] In 2007, there was a mini-boom of shows celebrating the feminist legacy, including important historical exhibitions of feminist art like "WACK!" at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (later at PS1) and "Global Feminisms" at the Brooklyn Museum, which provided the occasion for various panels and think pieces addressing the issue of bias in the art world. It was enough for observers to talk hopefully about a renewed "feminist surge."[6]

Yet not a year has gone by that some commentator has not found cause to report on continued discrepancies. In 2012, a group called the East London Fawcett Group took it upon itself to "audit" the Frieze Art Fair—a massive event with a focus on high-end contemporary art bringing together galleries from all over the world, and therefore a fairly good barometer of international trends—and found that just 27.5 percent of the 3,441 artists in the fair's commercial section were women.[7] Progress toward gender parity in visual art, it would seem, appears to be stuck.

When I was writing the first version of this essay during the initial outpouring of pieces on the topic in 2005, what struck me was how little explanation there was for *how* this sorry state of affairs came to be. The question of sexism was implied to be a kind of freakish anomaly, a case of bad ideas that could be taken on simply by exposing them. And yet, there are plenty of powerful women in leadership positions in the arts—in fact, the majority of the vast curatorial team for the 2005 "Greater New York" were women. So what exactly was going on?

In her justly famous 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," art historian Linda Nochlin argued that commentators had to reconsider the terms of the question, focusing less on the miracle of individual "greatness" and more on the structural realities that had prevented women from achieving success: "The question of women's equality—in art as in any other realm—devolves not upon the relative benevolence or ill-will of individual men, nor the self-confidence or abjectness of individual women, but rather on the very nature of our institutional structures themselves and the view of reality they impose on the human beings who are part of them."[8]

Today, women have battled for and won the right to be taken seriously as artists. On a certain level, the historical barrier to "greatness" that Nochlin outlined has receded and seems a thing of the past—anyone today who openly stated that being a woman was itself a barrier to being a great artist would have the full weight of art history against him and could expect to be challenged.[9] And yet despite the outward appearance of fair-mindedness, *in some ways* women remain disadvantaged as artists. Nochlin's perspective on this phenomenon remains crucial: the task still does not hinge on acknowledging "the relative benevolence or ill-will of individual men, nor the self-confidence or abjectness of individual women," but rather on figuring out the structural mechanisms that make bias tenacious and enduring.

Because the answer seemed hidden, I felt it was likely linked to the indistinctly understood networks that determined success in the arts, the hidden pathways by which consensus is formed about what is worth attention and who will be chosen to succeed. In his review of the 2005 "Greater New York," the critic Jerry Saltz made two important observations. The first was the low number of women artists involved. The other was that, despite curatorial rhetoric that the survey had been based on an "open call," "Greater New York" looked very much like a feeder for product already approved by New York's mainstream commercial art scene:

> "Greater New York" is so completely geared to budding artists that there's a whiff of pedophilia about it, the feeling that if an artist is over a certain age he or she has already worn out a welcome. In fact, young as they are, many of the "emerging artists" in "Greater New York" aren't even that emerging: 11 have been in a Whitney Biennial, one—the always intriguing Carol Bove—has been on the cover of *Artforum*, the duo of Oliver Payne & Nick

Relph has graced the cover of *Flash Art*, and over 100 are already represented by galleries.[10]

Digging into the subject a little, it struck me that coordinating these two observations—the lack of women and the commercial bias—was a good starting point in getting at the heart of the problem.

To understand the mechanics of success in the visual arts, one has to be clear that it is a complex space where moral, theoretical, or aesthetic motivations wrestle against brute commercial calculation. Rather than an ivory tower, as some claim, the "art world" is a golden pyramid whose broad and unshakable base is constructed of art dealers, who are at the end of the day small businesspeople. Whatever other passions they bring to the table, they must find someone to buy the aesthetic goods that they sell, or cease business—and the primary market for "fine art" remains people with large amounts of disposable cash. Therefore, the vicissitudes of how wealth is distributed in the economy as a whole will make a difference when it comes to who has the capacity to purchase art and whose interests thereby dominate.

The persistent "wealth gap" between women and men in the economy at large very likely has something to do with a bias toward male artists in the market, then. According to one stunning study, despite gains in income, women overall still have just 36 percent of the accumulated wealth that men do.[11] At its top end, the art market represents quite a small cluster of people, mainly individuals who have inherited vast amounts of wealth or who have accumulated fortunes as titans of industry or finance. The stereotypical art buyers of the new millennium, before and after the financial crisis of 2008, were Russian oligarchs and New York and London hedge-fund millionaires—both groups that are, it is safe to say, predominantly male. Review the lists of top art collectors and you will see that even if you count all the members of the various husband-and-wife duos separately, the ratio skews male.[12] If this fact entails even a slight bias in terms of which gender gets taken seriously, it might seriously affect who sells and thereby which artists go on to glory.[13]

On the supply side of the equation, the wealth gap and other ingrained barriers toward women's advancement in society more broadly are likely to make life more difficult for female artists. The National Endowment for the Arts says that the field of what it counts as "fine artists" splits almost equally between men and women. Yet, despite being better educated than their male counterparts (with more than 55 percent reporting having a "bachelor's degree or higher," as opposed to about 47 percent of men), female artists report just 81 cents of income for every dollar their male counterparts take in (a median income of $29,000 versus $36,000) and are far more likely to say they are pursuing their art career part time.[14] The income gap widens significantly for older women. The reasons are obscure but perhaps have something to do with the burdens of raising children, which still disproportionately fall on women.[15] Perhaps this is one reason why, in the creative sphere, women are 6 percent less likely to have children than female workers as a whole.[16]

For women, the key kink in the system, however, seems to occur between art school—where they are generally thought to be at parity, if not in the majority—and initial contact with the system of gallery representation, where the number plummets. It seems, then, that a lot rides on understanding the mechanisms by which artists come to show at a gallery. This process is notoriously opaque, based largely on behind-the-scenes networks and backroom elbow-rubbing. Bravado takes you a long way in the image-driven world of art, and all the issues of eroded self-esteem and gender stereotyping that girls face from a very early age must take their toll here.[17]

Yet since there are plenty of assertive and confident women in the arts, we still need to see how discrimination insinuates itself in practice. The same year as the Brainstormers' "Greater New York" protest, Kathy Grayson, curator at New York's Deitch Projects—then the epicenter of emerging-artist hype in New York—put together *Live Through This: New York in 2005*, a slender and lively book that attempted with some prescience to round up the best of the contemporary scene. It included profiles of such soon-to-be-stars as Cory Arcangel, assume vivid astro focus, Dan Colen, and Terence Koh. The twenty-seven entries mention exactly three individual women: Bec Stupak, a creator of psychedelic, tribal films and performances inspired by rave culture; Misaki Kawai, who realizes aggressively whimsical environments incorporating cartoon themes; and Julie Atlas Muz, a burlesque dancer. (The female-dominated music acts Tracy and the Plastics, Le Tigre, and Avenue D were also mentioned as part of the broader hipster constellation.) In her accompanying essay, Grayson is quite clear about the personal ties that underpin this constellation of figures:

> The most interesting part of the organization of this group of people is the insane degree of complexity with which everyone is interconnected. Brian Belott and the Huron Street people, who came from various Providence beginnings, put the Dearraindrop people up when they're in town, who in turn used to affiliate with the Paper Rad people, who have gone on tour with Cory [Arcangel], who also curated a show featuring a bunch of the artists in this book including Justin [Samson], who collaborated with AVAF [assume vivid astro focus] in Miami and lives with me and Ry [Fyan], who in turn showed with Dash [Snow] and Dan [Colen] at Rivington Arms a while ago, Dash having used Brendan [Fowler], Dan, Ryan [McGinley], Ry, Keegan [McHargue]—I mean, the majority of these people—as his subjects, Dash's awesome-looking living room wall being the subject of Dan's next painting, who seems to be in all of Ryan's early photographs—Ryan who is close friends with Brendan and Philip and Terrance [Koh], who are all in the next *K48* issue Eli [Sudbrack]'s

friend Scott is doing, which also includes Jules [de Balincourt], Matt Leines, Devendra [Banhart]—and on and on, ad infinitum.[18]

Of such raw social materials are artistic careers made, as the line between who is cool and who is not, who is in and who is out, who is marketable and who is not, is subtly drawn—and, with the exception of Grayson herself, *not a single woman* features in that account. If there is an initial disposition for dealers to bring in male artists and those male artists are then disposed to recommend and work with their own male friends, then this state of affairs has the potential to create a cascade effect. Grayson's exciting new scene sounds a lot like the old boys' club.

Lucy Lippard once wrote about the need for special initiatives to promote women artists, the project to which she dedicated herself in the early 1970s:

> A large-scale exhibition of women's art in New York is necessary at this time for a variety of reasons: because so few women have up until now been taken seriously enough to be considered for, still less included in, general group shows; because there are so few women in the major commercial galleries; because young women artists are lucky if they can find ten successful older women artists to whom to look as role models; because although 75 percent of the undergraduate arts student body is female, only 2 percent of their teachers are female. And, above all, because the New York museums have been particularly discriminatory, usually under the guise of being discriminating.[19]

In the decades since, a large number of female artists have won serious respect and commercial credibility. The situation in the new millennium has been unmistakably transformed since Lippard penned those words (although when confronted about the disparity in "Greater New York" in 2005, curator Klaus Biesenbach could still defend himself by saying, "Any discrepancy is due to the quality of the art"—pretty much the definition of being discriminatory in the guise of being discriminating).[20] But the persistence of the issue shows that it is wrong to think that some progress means that the fight for equality can be put on autopilot and that art history is on an inevitable march toward greater equity. The statistics from the book *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art* (2007) are worth quoting at some length in this regard:

> Because certain women artists—from 30-year-old Dana Schutz to nonagenarian Louise Bourgeois—currently have high profiles in galleries, major private collections, museums, and the marketplace, it may be perceived that the situation for women artists has improved significantly over the past 35 years. But by examining the number of solo exhibitions by women artists presented from the mid-1970s until the present, through a representative sampling of influential galleries, we can see that while the situation did improve until the 1990s, it appears to have reached a plateau. In the 1970s, women accounted for only 11.6 percent of solo gallery exhibitions. In the 1980s, the percentage of solo exhibitions by women crept up to 14.8 percent, and in the 1990s the number increased to 23.9 percent, but the percentage has dropped slightly, to 21.5 percent, in the first half decade of the 21st century. The current number of solo gallery exhibitions by women artists is not notably better than the average of women's exhibitions for the entire period under consideration, 18.7 percent. While the number of women artists' exhibitions has doubled since the early 1970s, it has really only kept pace with an expanded market: women still have roughly one opportunity for every four of the opportunities open to men. Museums have only a slightly better track record. During the 35 years we surveyed, 27 percent of solo museum exhibitions presented the work of women artists.[21]

What might account for this subtle erosion of women's gains in the gallery during this period? In the book *Witness to Her Art*, Michael Brenson hypothesizes that it might have something to do with "the return of the art market as the nearly unquestioned arbiter of value and success" and "the rise to unprecedented prominence of the private collector" at the turn of the millennium, as museums began to compete more seriously for the attention of the swelling ranks of newly super-rich patrons in the neoliberal New Gilded Age.[22] Through the nineties, the center of curatorial and critical discourse was still held by theories that bore the charge bequeathed to them by the feminist movement, in however distorted a form. The triumph of the market, Brenson believes, undermined that heritage:

> After a period in which "marginal," "alternative," and "peripheral" art had, it seemed, finally been aesthetically and culturally legitimized, museums were again becoming dependent on collectors who had little interest in art shown outside powerful galleries and mainstream art centers. By 2000 it was clear that the struggle to attract collectors and their collections was controlling patterns of acquisition in most influential American museums.[23]

And yet—and this is important—the backsliding on feminist issues is hardly confined to the rarified world of the arts. In an age of escalating inequality, just because women are more visible than ever before in leadership roles does not mean that the lives of the great masses of women are necessarily better. Contemporary pundits talk about "The End of Men" and the inevitable triumph of the Second Sex, even as women continue to make less money and face demonstrable discrimination.[24] Across the economy, the decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s saw a dramatic integration of women into traditionally male-dominated fields. And yet researchers have sounded the alarm that the subsequent two decades have been characterized by either stagnation or reversal of these gains.[25] The gap in wealth between the sexes remains even more alarming. As Mariko Chang put it bluntly to the Clayman Institute for Gender Research in 2011, "The gender revolution has stalled."[26]

It doesn't take a brain surgeon—or a Brainstormer—to hypothesize that the two stats—the status accorded to women as artists and the status of women in general in the economy—might be interwoven.

The sixties and seventies gave birth to a combative women's liberation movement that scared the powers-that-were into according more respect to women's points of view in almost every field, made reproductive rights a central axis of politics, and left in its wake numerous women's organizations and advocacy groups. This critical sensibility created a public for women's art, found its way into the establishment, and by the nineties had made multiculturalism and feminism central aspects of exploration and research.

But a thirty-year backlash against feminism can't help but take a toll. Without a dynamic and activist-oriented women's rights movement, institutional gains remain fragile and contradictory. Mainstream women's organizations, dominated by middle-class politics, became more focused on lobbying largely perfidious politicians than on mobilizing numbers to protest.[28] In the arena of art, as in the academy in general, feminism turned inward toward postmodern identity politics, away from even a symbolic connection to popular protest.[29] Meanwhile, the golden lure of individual success for a few superstars in a booming art market distracted from the importance of arguing for systematic accountability and provided a context in which persistent biases could fester.

These factors set the stage for the strange and disorienting postfeminist quagmire of the new millennium. It is to these factors that we must turn our minds and energy if we want to do something about the sorry state of affairs we find ourselves in now. Focusing narrowly on changing attitudes within the "art world" is a case of tilting at ideological windmills, unless it is self-consciously linked to the larger issues facing women in general. Without making this connection, we can neither understand the problem nor hope to alter it.

CODA

This particular essay holds a special place in my heart. Beginning to investigate the enigma of the underrepresentation of women in the supposedly liberal and feminist art world was what first led me to try and grasp the mechanisms by which artistic success is attained and how these mechanisms connect with the larger inequalities affecting society—both subjects that often remain concealed beneath the glittering parade of new spectacles. Pulling on that particular thread uncovers unpleasant realities that disadvantage women but also frustrate the vast majority of artists, male and female: the blind biases of an art market dominated by the superrich and

the privileges commanded by clubs of insiders. Sexism has its own special dynamics that have to be specially combated. But for me, the connections made in this essay point to how the fight for equality can be waged on the basis of genuine solidarity, in the name of a world where art's value escapes the deformities imposed upon it by an unequal society.