

‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ Linda Nochlin Didn’t Just Ask the Un-Askable, She Forced the Art World to Give a Better Answer.

By [Jerry Saltz](#) October 30, 2017 4:28 pm



Linda Nochlin, standing in front of Deborah Kass's 1997 work *Orange Disaster* (Linda Nochlin). Photo: Clint Spaulding/Patrick McMullan.

In 1971, art historian Linda Nochlin blew through the gates of art-world patriarchy with her paradigm-changing-on-a-dime essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”

Nochlin’s question wasn’t a question at all. She saw that just to ask that was to bait people into asking deeper, harder questions about gender injustice in the arts. Nochlin saw that the question didn’t pass the smell test, that the answer was that women had been systematically excluded, over centuries and into the present, by an evolving art-historical status hierarchy that

nevertheless always found a way to belittle, demean, and dismiss women — women who were always outsiders in a status hierarchy stacked in favor of already accepted ideas, narratives, and long outdated and inadequately reasoned art histories. In concise, direct, often funny language and contrapuntal reasoning that tested every premise with example, Nochlin saw how shaky the structures were that were being used to keep women artists outside history. She didn't look at the victim, plaintively pleading cases for why this or that artist really *was* as “great a genius” as Goya; she looked at the institution of art history and demonstrated how it was intellectually, semiotically, and psychoanalytically corrupt.

And she blew it down.

The conclusion of her essay says it well. It was “*institutionally* made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, *no matter what* the potency of their so-called talent or genius.” Thus it was that before Nochlin's essay it always seemed like any time one came up with a woman artist, that artist would be dismissed as “a lady painter,” “minor,” “not a genius.”

“Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists” was published in the January 1971 of *Art News* in an issue dedicated to “Women's liberation. Women artists, and art history.” Nochlin died this weekend, and her death will surely prompt a flood of tributes. All on its own, the essay exploded the art world; even if Nochlin had never done another thing, never written anything else and not engaged in decades of feminist activism, this one essay would have canonized her. In just a little over 4,000 words, Nochlin — who had a Ph.D. in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts, an M.A. in English literature from Columbia, and a B.A. in philosophy from Vassar, and had written extensively on Gustave Courbet and the 19th-century movement known as Realism — turned her attention to the question that people were silently thinking about but that no one was gutsy enough to ask out loud.

Well, not everyone. At a 1970 Vassar graduation ceremony, her friend and well-known art dealer Richard Feigen asked her exactly that question. “I went home,” she said, “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 that this was a natural condition.” The question implied there was something wrong or lacking or inadequate, not up to the task, with women. Nochlin wrote that in her mind, before this 1971 moment, that women's liberation had been “chiefly emotional — personal, psychological, and subjective — centered.” And she instantly turned that around. It was time to “come to grips with the intellectual and ideological basis of various intellectual and scholarly disciplines.” That is, to turn from individual experience to systemic structures in considering the question of male oppression.

In her essay, Nochlin asserts that “those who have privileges invariably hold on to them.” She showed how the “white-male-position is accepted as natural” and how this meant that male artists had “a decided advantage.” Nochlin said she wanted to question “the assumptions lying behind the question” and wrote of the “stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging (practices against) all of those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and above all, male.” She went on to say, “The fault lies not in our stars,

our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education.”

“Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists” shows just how dramatically, and for how long, the whole system was tilted against women artists. For the 500 years since the Renaissance, the primary, maybe the only, way that the greatness of art was measured was in the figure. It was seen to derive from Greece and Rome, from the ages. And the figure that was most worshipped was the nude figure. Men could be trained in this discipline, practice with other masters, apprentice, and were positioned to learn this skill. But women were deemed too fragile, feminine, or sexually unable handle being in a room learning to draw and paint from a live nude model — male or female. So women were not allowed to attend schools, apprentice with other artists, or to learn the language of art. Thus the very measures of artistic prowess, inspiration, and imagination were male. Moodiness in men was greatness and genius; in women, in was melodrama and hysteria.

There was no way in if it was improper for a woman to draw or paint a nude. A woman artist was, as Nochlin said, “deprived of what this ultimate stage of training meant, in effect, deprived of the possibility of creating major works of art.” Of being an artist at all, she might have added. Women artists had been effectively gerrymandered out of the districts of art, dismissed as amateurs, minor, not serious, silly. Nochlin rightly charged that these structures and the all of our internalization of them “guard men from unwanted competition in their ‘serious’ professional activities.” She went on, “The choice for women always seems to be marriage *or* a career.” Not for men.

Having no degrees, I taught myself art history. In the 1980s, Nochlin’s book *Realism* was a bible to me; a portal to Flaubert, as well as Daumier, Courbet, Millet, Manet and a hundred obscure 19th-century artists, all of whom taught me that bad art tells us as much as good art. That all art is alive and contemporary when you’re seeing it. She and Robert Rosenblum blasted open these doors and deserve enormous credit for it. Nochlin was also great on two personal favorites, Florine Stettheimer and Berthe Morisot. She wrote about contemporary art, too, but her taste in it could be dubious. Although she surprised me in 1999 by writing beautifully on Sylvia Sleigh (who was 83 by then), and then in 2014 on the under-known Ellen Altfest. Really, history was her roundhouse, patriarchal art history her foe. Mostly, she played the part of gallant welcoming superstar to generations of grateful artists and historians. She was probably the reigning unnamed empress of the College Art Association for all that time, too. Her being on a panel was guaranteed to bring crowds of loving fans. Either way, Nochlin is among the greatest art historians who ever lived. She changed the world.

The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964. Stonewall happened in 1969. Women are always last. Still, in 1970 Germaine Greer published *The Female Eunuch* (which unpacked how almost all social norms render women “eunuchs”), the Equal Rights Amendment passed the U.S. House, and Judy Chicago helped create the first-ever feminist art courses at Fresno State College in California. The next year Nochlin’s essay lit a fire in the art world. In her simple, wry, furious reasoning she laid waste to the whole idea of “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists.” We can now divide art-world feminism into Before and After Nochlin’s essay.