

ARTNEWS

DEBORAH KASS RESPONDS

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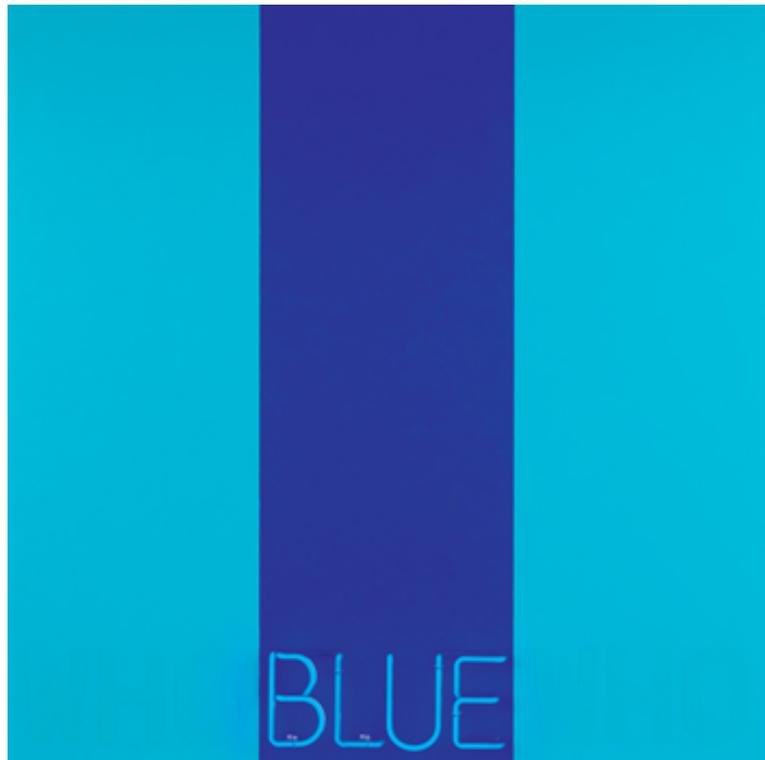
The following is a response to Maura Reilly's article "[Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes](#)" about the current statistics of Women in the Art World. Our coverage begins with our [Editor's Letter](#).

*Born in 1952, lives in Brooklyn,
New York*

I was raised in a very middle-class post-war world. In this generation, white middle-class mothers did not get the respect fathers did. It was just like *Mad Men*—those were the values I grew up with. It's what was on TV, in the movies and advertising. My sister and I cleared the dishes while my brother sat after dinner. It was the '60s, pre-civil rights and the women's movement. No one taught us girls how to be in the world.

Luckily, I had my grandmother. Her parents were Hungarian immigrants who didn't speak English. They lived in a firetrap in the Bronx along with their five children. My grandmother hocked her engagement ring at 20 and opened a clothing store, worked 18-hour days, and made a successful business. She was not cuddly and wise. She was smart and tough. She ran the family, she was the boss, she was our Tony Soprano and just as complicated. I adored her.

When I went to art school, there were almost no women teachers. The only women in the art-history books were Mary Cassatt and Georgia O'Keeffe. Every artist in history was white and male.



I was on the young end of feminism. I really bought it hook, line, and sinker. It changed my life.

When I got to New York in 1974 or '75, to me the most interesting work was being done by women. There was no hint of a problem being a woman painter. I saw Pat Steir, Elizabeth Murray, Mary Heilmann, Faith Ringgold, Susan Rothenberg, Louise Fishman, Harmony Hammond, Lois Lane, Joan Snyder—a seemingly endless number of women painters. What they were doing mattered.

The question is, how much have we lost since then?

It was a real shock to suddenly see men completely dominate painting's discourse and the new market of the early '80s, when Ronald Reagan became president. My male peers were really in sync with the values of the times. I think the women weren't ready for the business that art was to become by 1980, but it was obviously something the men understood. You can go through every movement in the '80s, and there are virtually no women involved in them, neither Neo-Expressionism nor Neo-Geo. Painting was again entrenched in anachronistic clichés of genius and greatness. And people bought it! If you were a '70s feminist fighting the good fight, this seemed just historically strange. Painting in the '70s really challenged those clichés. I thought the world changed because of feminism. I was wrong.

Appropriation was a different story because it wasn't painting. In my fantasy those brilliant women said to themselves, "I'm not even going to try to paint. I'm going to figure something else out." Photography was then a marginal market activity. Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Laurie Simmons, and Sarah Charlesworth made critical and radical work, arguably the most important work of the '80s. I am not sure any of them made the kind of money the male painters their age did.

I was hopeful for my generation, but we proved disappointing. I'm just terrified for my nieces. In four decades of my adult life women's wages went up a total of 10 cents per every dollar earned by men, to 75 cents. That is economic inequality and should be an embarrassment for everyone. It is discrimination pure and simple. Women should go on strike. Do all men really think they are entitled to 25 percent more of everything?

When the top hedge-fund people are women, when the president is a woman, when the top earners are 50 percent women, things will be different. Is that ever going to happen? Why not? There was a report by Oxfam recently that said at this rate, it will take 75 years to achieve equal pay for equal work. If Hillary Clinton wins, it's going to be fantastic for women in the arts. I would like to see the White House filled with women's art. That would be a good start.

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