

Between Poiesis and Praxis: Women and Art

Françoise Collin

In memory of Marthe Wéry, who laid her red-painted planks against the wall of
Beaubourg before she left us.

The absence, or at least the meagre presence, of creative women in the history of art has long remained unexamined. It reflects their absence from the processes that determine the shape of the lived world and that are sustained by the polity, whether it be through supposed universal suffrage, which ignores them, or through parity of representation, which still remains to be achieved.

The half of the *demos* which is absent from voting-stations and parliaments, is also absent from studios, exhibitions, art galleries and more generally from the public space. Granted, women are 'represented' everywhere in art, but they are not present. They are spoken but not speaking. Viewed but not viewing. A state which, from 1970, led Linda Nochlin (1988), amid the early tumult of the feminist movement, to bluntly pose in a stand-out article the question: 'Why have there never been any great women artists?' The answer she gave dismissed the usual explanation – that women seemed to lack the special 'genius' essential for creativity – and pointed instead to the historical and social conditions by which their creativity has been stifled. From that point on, the question constantly re-echoed throughout the feminist movement, re-expressing itself in different forms, both in its generality¹ and in association with specific works.

Rather than being questioned and contested, the fact of 'the absence of great women artists' has been accepted as a matter of truth by philosophers, as a kind of ontological given grounded in nature. Throughout history they have found sophisticated justifications for this which were thought to echo common sense (Collin, Pisier and Varikas 1999). When it came to the question of women (for there was never a question of men), the philosopher most often relayed and confirmed common opinion, ratifying it as a state of fact, rather than discussing it in order to test its truth value.

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The absence or very limited presence of women producing creative works through the course of history relates to several features. In the first place, long confined within the private, or more specifically the domestic space, women did not see themselves as potential artists – as actors in the world they inhabited – and furthermore were denied access to the training necessary for the production of art works, whether this be in the studio of a master or in the schools of Fine Arts, from which they were excluded until the 20th century. Some, however, did manage to obtain the necessary apprenticeship alongside a father, or perhaps a lover, and were able to work in his shadow. Secondly, in contrast to a considerable number of noteworthy painters in the past, women could not benefit from the patronage of great commissioners of art from the Court, the aristocracy or the Church, any more, moreover, than they can even today be regarded as dependable items on the ‘art market’, which is the contemporary era’s court of legitimisation.

In the domain of letters, which does not require particular training nor an infrastructure but rather a ‘room of one’s own’ as Virginia Woolf would have it but which most still do not enjoy, women do stand out more – or at least a few of them do. However, they are still in the minority and are mainly represented in the familiar forms of epistolary or journal writing, but also in the novel.²

It is noteworthy, however, that women are more numerous in fields where the work is not attached to a specific named author and thus remains anonymous, and thereby not caught up in issues of power: such is the case for the ethnic or popular arts that contemporary museums are in competition over, but also for those which, under the label ‘raw art’ (*Art brut*),³ produced by ‘outsiders’ on the fringe of society, have been brought together and rendered visible through the initiative of Jean Dubuffet among others.

The obstacles confronted by women in the generation of art works are added to by the paucity if not the sheer absence of systems for their reception. Art criticism and history have long remained blind to the originality of works of female origin or even quite simply to their existence, and for the most part have not rated them for their intrinsic qualities but only in relation to their author’s standing as some man’s lover, wife, daughter, disciple or Muse. This form of privileging has moreover not entirely disappeared from the contemporary art scene.

This *de facto* situation finds its echo and its justification in philosophical rationalism. The famous distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, as enunciated by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* following on from Edmund Burke, is expressed in gendered terms: women are at best capable of the beautiful, even the ornamental, but not of the sublime. Simone de Beauvoir herself, who is not short on severity when it comes to her ‘sisters’, considers that they, with rare exceptions (among whom she perhaps numbers herself though that is not certain) have till now demonstrated only talent, but not genius. Curiously though, she excludes from this judgement the works of the mystics, in particular that of Theresa of Avila, a viewpoint which inspired Jacques Lacan in the “Encore” seminar.

The ongoing work of reflection and review of these apparent realities, inspired by the feminist movement in the final third of the 20th century, thus arises from a dual enterprise which relates on the one hand to elucidating the absence or relative absence of women from the history of art through an examination of the histori-

cal and social context rather than through any purported ontological insufficiency, and on the other to rehabilitating those women artists who, though having indeed created works, saw them not so much suppressed as cloaked in complete silence. It is a matter of both – and through a process of subtlety – emphasising the historical conditions which accounted for the rarity of great women artists, and of bringing to visibility and prominence the concealed existence of those that there were. It is incumbent upon women historians to undertake this work of resuscitation and resurrection through a fundamental reworking of the past.

Politics and the Symbolic: The Distribution of the Sensible

Over many centuries, and in many different cultures, women have not only been absent from the political stage, the realm where decisions concerning the organisation of the community are taken, but also from the artistic stage, that on which is determined the vitality of the forms by which that community and its representation are shaped, through a process which Jacques Rancière (2000) has so aptly named the 'distribution of the sensible'. Their exclusion from the political domain goes hand in hand with their exclusion from the domain of the symbolic, throwing into question moreover the linkage between these two registers. For if, following the distinction argued by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, action (meaning political action) is distinct from fabrication (of objects), art, though represented historically by objects, belongs to the register of action. Thus Arendt, seemingly somewhat hesitant, places the discussion and analysis of art at the end of the chapter she devotes to action, just before that on fabrication: on the side of *praxis* rather than that of *poiesis*, as if she had the feeling that one day art would no longer even require the fashioning of an object.

The state of exclusion or minimisation of women artists has persisted under various guises up till the present day. The history of art recognises a very limited number of women, and fewer still of women who played a determining role in art movements. No doubt this is in part due to a myopic approach to historiography to which it is important to bring retrospective remedies. But it is also, and especially, due to an enduring social and socio-political fact. Few women have been the initiators of a movement or even the creators of a work of marked importance in the history of art, not because they were afflicted with a congenital incapacity to do so, but because, despite gradually being able to take a place on the art stage and become part of its history, including that of the 'avant-gardes' (Bonnet 2006), they still today struggle to play on that stage the role of *initium* or to be recognised thereon as such. A psychoanalytical reading of this impasse would attribute it to the factual and fantastic omnipotence of the mother which, for both sexes, paralyses the capacity for self-reference. The constitution of a horizontal linkage between women initiated by feminism (under the ephemeral category of 'sorority') leaves still in a state of latency the constitution of vertical and diachronic female symbolic genealogies through a process of affiliation which a retrospective 'herstory' cannot replace.

The attainment of affirmative status by women artists through the progressive elaboration of a singular *œuvre*, pursued in stages over the course of a life, is more-

over relatively recent. It must be acknowledged that not only the political realm but also that of fine arts has historically and in all cultures been a male domain. Art, and more particularly the plastic arts which give shape to the world have been for the greater part, if not exclusively, the product of male artists. Not only in the representation of persons (their image), but also in the organisation of space and at once the simple division between interior and exterior, governed by urbanism and architecture: the complete life of forms.

For centuries, and still today in some Mediterranean cultures, space itself was gendered, both through the disposition of urban and architectural forms as through cultural or religious imperatives that governed the distinction between interior and exterior, with women confined to the former. But women were no more in their own private space in their home as in the public space. Historically speaking they were effectively denied not only the public domain but equally the private, since their private space was coalesced with the domestic space and absorbed by it, thus making the creation of an art work difficult.

The for the greater part and long-time exclusively masculine character of artistic creation is of no mean importance if we consider that art is not supplementary to or simply an ornament of – a ‘superstructure’ in Marxist terms – the organisation of human relationships, but a fundamental mode of this organisation, which contributes to the elaboration of the symbolic space as much as the real which it articulates, tempering both reality and its shadow’.⁴

The ‘distribution of the sensible’ is thus dissymmetrical – in the same sense as the distribution of the political, social or economic: it is determined by half of humanity confining the other to the home. The political and the poetic – praxis and the plastic – are the two forms through which the lived world is constituted, and historical male dominance is channelled as much by one as by the other. ‘Representation’ in whatever sense it is understood is the prerogative of the gendered half of humanity which holds both political power and the power of the symbolic. This ‘phallogocentrism’ is effectively a ‘phallogocentrism’, as Jacques Derrida terms it, characterised by the conjoint appropriation of the two spaces of the logos, represented in the Greek *polis* by the agora and the theatre. Political representation and theatrical representation are the two faces – the two inscription frames – of a people, the two forms of scansion and the two enactments of its presence, the two forms of its power set against its lack of power. And these two forms have excluded women both from their centre-stage as from their staging process. Women are confined by them to a role and within a space which dooms them to symbolic sterility.

Contemporary Art: From Savoir-faire to Authority

The modalities determining the elaboration and identification of an art work have varied over the centuries. The 20th century saw a change in status and meaning for the work of art: it was the end of ‘grand art’ which Hegel had already announced and which Heidegger came to confirm. The name of Duchamp is the contemporary reference point for this change. With him and the introduction of *readymades*, the art work no longer depended either on its conformity to a model, or on a technical skill

acquired over a long apprenticeship – the acquisition of a *savoir-faire* or *poiesis* – but rather on the production of an effect of strangeness by the displacement and positioning (*mise-en-situation*) of a random object: the ‘whatever’, which for Duchamp turned out to be a urinal. The work thus became a pure *praxis* of *poiesis*, an action which requires little or no fabrication.

The obstacle represented by the lack of skilled training, which had long been denied women because of their difficulty in gaining access to art schools or training studios, becomes no longer relevant if ‘do anything’ is the main motif for the work. Art becomes ostensibly the most democratic act imaginable since any person, any woman, can take advantage of it. Art no longer arises from the fashioning of an object, requiring skilled expertise acquired over a long apprenticeship, but from displacement. Detached from its *fabricatory* aspects, it becomes a pure *action*. Imagination takes precedence over *savoir-faire*. Thus, the idea that ‘everything is art’ and that every person is a potential artist asserts itself, such that the whole category that art embraces is itself shaken and the museum becomes suspect for being the depository of dead objects. Thus, albeit with a certain delay, the prophecy of Hegel seems to have been fulfilled, that ‘art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past’ (Hegel 1975, 1: 11). ‘After the end of art’, to borrow Danto’s title (1997) the art work changes meaning in the general course of its desacralisation.

One might then ask whether this latter process, which may disputably be perceived as a democratisation of the art work and of the status of the artist, is or is not favourable to women. Is the progressive emergence of women on to the art stage linked to the evolution of its definition or rather to the evolution of their condition, an evolution which, through the assistance of the feminist movement of the 20th century, even if they were not part of it, enables them henceforth to be defined and recognised as *initium*, capable of being initiatory (Arendt)?

The question remains an open one, for if artistic expression has ceased being dependent upon professional skill, which conceptual art radically demonstrates, for example, it has become more dependent than ever, even dependent above all else on the authority of its creator. The ‘random whatever’ – the bottle-holder or urinal put out by Duchamp – indeed does become an art work but it is not on the authority of ‘whosoever’ nor, besides, wherever. The ‘whatever’ goes accompanied by certain conditions of presentation which are not ‘anything goes’.

First and foremost, Duchamp was chairman of the first *Salon des Indépendants*, even if he did resign from that position. As Thierry de Duve has written (2000: 28), ‘he carefully laid his strategy over an extended period, arranged to be appointed chairman of the exhibiting committee, furtively slipped it a banana skin named *Fountain*, absented himself from the stormy meeting during which *Fountain* was rejected, solemnly presented his resignation, then contrived to have the object reappear as if by magic before Steiglitz’s camera lens’.

What the art work loses in terms of no longer demanding training – or *métier* – it regains and requires in terms of authority. It is no longer the mastery of technique that is essential as much as the audacity of the act of displacement or intervention. A heap of ash in a street is devoid of meaning. A heap of ash on the wooden floor of a museum or exhibition becomes injected with meaning, becoming part of ‘quotation art’ (Compagnon 1979; Cauquelin 1998). And the heap of ash in the museum gives

at once life and death to the heap of ash in the street. It is no longer, or no longer so much, the nature of the object itself which is decisive but situationality (*mise-en-situation*).

Thus, the art work becomes 'impurified', to use a term of Alain Badou. The boundary between art and non-art becomes tenuous, even to the point of being unidentifiable, while yet still very real. It is not by chance that in the 1970s theatre, dance and the plastic arts all quit their dedicated spaces and explored completely novel sites for performance in the street, the factory, the private house. At the same time, the artwork abandoned its mythic reference to the 'masterpiece' in its inviolate unicity. In this vein, the infinite reproductions of the same portrait of Mao dissolved its mythic power, and reduced it to a simple artefact of the 'era of technological reproducibility' (Benjamin, 2008), rather than according it mythic status. For the status of the image is not unequivocal: the image is at once that which institutes and sacralises, and that which deposes and renders banal. Standing between these two, it necessitates an act, in one sense an act of faith, recalling the ancestral link between art and the sacred even in the midst of its own desacralisation.

This transition from the register of expertise to that of authority in the determination of what constitutes the art work is not necessarily advantageous to women. For if expertise can be acquired, authority, for its part, must be won. Profiting from the gains made by the surge of feminism, even where they have kept their distance from it, it is to the winning of such authority that women artists have henceforth devoted themselves, going beyond the attainment of rights and access to skilled training, or through this path, to the pure and simple affirmation of the 'this is art', fracturing in so doing the 'representation barrier'. This emphatic affirmation of claim to authority remains a venture full of risk for it requires that it be acknowledged by others (the public, the art critic): it solicits the 'assent of the other' for its recognition and even purely and simply for its existence. Whether the art work transits through a complex training in technique, as was the case historically, or whether it is dependent solely on the imagination governing the manipulation and displacement of prior-existing objects or of sight angles, it hangs on the question of the authority that its creators have acquired. Any person at random is not credited with the metamorphosis of any random thing. A work, when it does not result from a commission but from free initiative, does not become a work of art until recognised as such, at least by some. Socio-historical elements intermesh with properly aesthetic aspects in what, across contemporary art, is remodelling and redistributing the 'distribution of the sensible' in its gendered version.

The relationships between art and power have changed, but they still persist. But at least women have now embarked, in an increasingly positive manner, on the process of the figuring and de-figuring of reality and in the interplay with their shadow (Levinas 1948).

From Women's Art to Feminist Art

The feminist movement has not only supported the emergence and recognition of women artists by the attention that it brought them and the accompanying com-

mentary that it made about them. Out of this movement there equally arose a form of contestatory art labelled as feminist art. It was an art of provocation which seized upon the most sacred symbols of the culture so as to parody and transgress them. Such a practice was nevertheless not peculiar to feminism alone: it was also to be found with an artist like Andy Warhol creating multiple images of Mao, or with Duchamp when he added a moustache to the Mona Lisa. But in feminist art it is generally phallic symbols which are emphasised. Parodic mimicry is a determinant form of a negation which carries within it a positive affirmation.

The first and richest manifestation of this form of art presented itself with the *Dinner Party* by the American artist Judy Chicago, around 1970. By means of a triangular installation, Chicago evoked the table of the Last Supper, where the apostles, multiplied several times over, are replaced by women famous in a variety of respects, and whose names have been etched in.

This concept and practice of 'feminist art' as a critical, even provocative art form which transgresses the sacred signs of the culture did not significantly develop on the French art scene, even if some expressions of it can be identified. (In the field of theory, the term 'feminist' has moreover been largely discarded in favour 'gender' – which purportedly has a more objective and dispassionate connotation.) As an example one can cite the work of the artist Sylvie Blocher which is an impertinent (but also very pertinent) echo of Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors*, under the title: *Disappointed, the Bride Got Dressed Again*. There are also the exuberant variations on the phallus created by Louise Bourgeois. But by extension, and beyond these deliberately provocative works, it is possible to consider all women's art as feminist in that, in its affirmation of sovereignty, it accords an authority over the world of signs and malleable forms from which up till then it had been excluded. Which leads us to the luxuriant display now to be found on the fourth floor of the Georges Pompidou Centre.

elles@beaubourg

Is an artwork essentially gendered, such that without any other justification one can bring together works by women for the purposes of an exhibition such as is being mounted this year at Beaubourg? It is possible – and there have been and will be no lack of attempts so to do – to emphasise the ambiguity of such a project and to go on discussing just how far it can be taken.⁵ Is not to devote a major exhibition, or even a theoretical study, to women's art tantamount to reinforcing what is specifically being denounced, that is that particularity which has led to their marginalisation? Does it not mean as well grouping works together in relation to social criteria, in this instance gender, which have but a very indirect relationship with what is important in art, that is, the aesthetic component?

No doubt. But every museum installation is contestable and carries with it an element of the arbitrary, functioning thus as a question as much as a statement with regard to the unicity of each work. Every exhibition engages a field of reflection, both through its coherence and through its dissonances. An exposition of women's art gives clear evidence of the vitality of women's creativity and provides opportu-

nity for discoveries and confrontations which are otherwise impossible. And if one cannot imagine or scarcely feels the need to organise a parallel exposition of men's art under the title *ils@beaubourg*, that is because it goes without saying that this is the norm: such would not be an event, rather it would command attention only to the extent that it would put a label on a broadly existing state of fact. And institutions cannot afford the luxury of an irony which, by bringing attention to a pleonasm, would amount to a provocation and which furthermore would constitute a waste of time by reiterating something already recognised.

An exhibition of women's works, any more than a study of the history of women's art, does not aim to impose the idea of an art that all women share in common across the centuries or in any given era, but to bear witness first and foremost to their presence, to confer a visibility which they have long lacked and still often lack, and to offer their work up to aesthetic discovery and the associated reflection that it may generate.

The ambivalence of such an undertaking was indeed something that bore upon the initial practice of the feminist movement: by systematically rehabilitating women, by rendering their work and their works an object of specific study, they were made visible, but this also carried the risk of isolating them from the evolution of the community of which they were a part. There was equally and also specifically the risk of obscuring that which gives each individual work its singularity, and which bears through that singularity an element of the universal.

It was in the light of such ambivalences that little by little the notion of *gender* began to take over from the old French concept of social relations determined by sex (*la différence*). It is even almost outmoded today to refer to women and men, since *queer studies*, embracing the Derridean notion of *différance* (with an "a"), have come to announce the good news of the gospel that once resounded on the banks of the Jordan: 'there will no more be female nor male'. Which literally seems to translate as: we can have sex with both men and women as we wish. Indeed we can, but what then? Does the reversal or plurality of sexual practices invalidate the socio-historical gender labels? Or the particularity of the sexes? Nothing hitherto leads us to think so from the examination of the facts.

Jacques Derrida, preceding Judith Butler in the field of deconstructionism, had already foreseen the end of the dual difference of the sexes in favour of a *différance* as an infinite process of differing, a philosophical position spanning a great range of fields but which up till now has been more ideological than effective with regard to the functioning of the socio-political, economic, artistic or even sexual environments. This was also, in somewhat premonitory fashion, the intent behind an earlier exhibition organised at Beaubourg around a gendered theme under the evidently post-modern (more post-modern than that of the present exposition) title of *feminine-masculine*. However, despite its ambition, this exposition did not escape falling into gender duality, whether in the selection of works or in their motifs, starting with Courbet's *The Origin of the World*, scarcely a trans-gender work, and which, exhibited near the entrance, served both as an introduction to and disavowal of the announced intent of the exposition.

Consequently it will scarcely come as any surprise that, without any particular deference to post-modern fashion, the Georges Pompidou Centre is this year organ-

ising a long-running display of works of contemporary women artists which it has acquired and holds in its reserve. This initiative should at the very least underline the importance of the presence of women in the art of the late 20th century and of the aesthetic forms through which this presence is expressed. For what rehabilitates the presence of women on the public art stage is at the same time a formal acknowledgement of their traditional relegation to minority status. Such an exhibition, in and through its insurmountable ambiguity, indirectly emphasises what it rectifies. To exhibit the works of women artists purchased by the Centre is to make them known, while at the same time openly acknowledging the lack of prominence, the invisibility even, from which they have suffered.

An initial rapid overview of the exhibition which opened at the end of May 2009 certainly leaves the impression of a great variety of artistic engagements and of an astonishing freshness of imagination. Each work stands out in its singularity, and one readily forgets that some historico-social conceptual postulate (women, gender, feminism) has guided their coming together, such that one apprehends them 'one by one', work by work, within the art register which is theirs. One also forgets that a certain declarative concern has been a factor in bringing them together such that one might discover or rediscover them in the affirmation of their singularity.

What stands out essentially from their juxtaposition as one passes from room to room is the absence of hectoring; they encapsulate the art of signifying without taking their emphasis "beyond the phallus" as Lacan would have said, or a little to one side. In this respect let me particularly draw attention, among other works, to Wendy Jacob's blue sheets, cast on the floor in an indefinable shape, and which one might carefully skirt round were it not that you notice that they are breathing: both nothing and everything, infused into this very slight but fascinating movement, unexpectedly discerned on the ground.

It appears across the different practices of museums, as through theoretical and historical analyses, elucidated by philosophical reflection, that the question of the relation between art and the difference of the sexes or genders still remains posed in the fragmentary responses that the new forms of art, theories and commentaries are bringing to it. And that art is not a thesis.

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Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. The third issue of 1975 of the journal *Cahiers du GRIF* was devoted to the theme of creativity under the heading: *Créer* (creation). Contributions from art critics Aline Dallier and Birgit Pelzer were regularly to appear in this journal. Subsequently, two issues were devoted to literary creativity, with participation from Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. The journal *Sorcières* was equally attentive to women's creativity. Yolaine Simha, among others, opened *Le Lieu dit* on the rue des Fossés-St-Jacques in Paris, which became a place for the presentation of works and artistic encounters.
2. The first recognised French novel was that of Madame de La Fayette, *La Princesse de Clèves*, in the 17th century.

3. Examples are held in the Musée de l'Art brut in Lausanne, as well as in others.
4. The title of a youthful article by Emmanuel Levinas relating to the meaning of art.
5. See the article 'Intersecting Views' by Nathalie Ernoult and Catherine Gonnard in this issue (*Editor's note*).

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