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Intersecting Views on the Exhibition "elles@centrepompidou"[1]

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"A crack in the glass ceiling"

Nowadays it's difficult to ignore the increasing importance of women artists on the international art scene. The majority of art students are female and women artists are gradually making a name for themselves in an art market till recently dominated by men. Museums are beginning, very hesitantly, to recognize women's work (monographs, exhibits of feminist art, etc.); academic studies have focused on them more and more, and recently a comprehensive study published by Elisabeth Lebovici and Catherine Gonnard has brought a number of women artists out of the shadows.[2]

However, women artists are still largely underrepresented in major museum collections (less than 20% of the collections in the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris, and 30% of acquisitions in the last five years), and what the Guerilla Girls exposed – the group of anonymous artists who put up posters around New York City protesting the miniscule number of women artists in museums there – "3% of women artists are in the Met, but 83% of the nudes are female!"– is still shockingly relevant. Even though there has been a slight improvement, the paths of women artists, especially at the beginning of their careers, are nevertheless strewn with obstacles. Here are some recent examples that we've heard about. A young female artist was told by a gallery director when she approached him about showing her work: "Your work is interesting but we already have two women in our gallery, and we cannot take on another" – and this was said straightforwardly, with no malice intended! Another example comes from the opening night of the exhibition "elles@centrepompidou" when a reporter from the Canal+ television network was interviewing one of the featured artists, and asked her this highly instructive question: "Do you have any children?" (Would he have dared ask a man that?) Despite the quality of their work and the depth of their professionalism, young female artists are always reduced to their identity as women. So it seems contradictory in this context to organize an exhibition and a collection that's entirely dedicated to *women* artists.

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At first Camille Morineau, the lead curator of "elles@centrepompidou" had proposed an exhibit of feminist art similar to recent large-scale surveys in American museums ("Wack!" and "Global Feminisms") or European ones ("Kiss Kiss Bang Bang" in Spain).[3] For various reasons – perhaps the word "feminism" still inspires fear in France – this proposal was rejected by the programming committee. Undaunted, Morineau suggested that when the museum's contemporary art collection was re-installed, the new focus should be on women's art. No doubt, in the upper echelons of the museum hierarchy it was thought that this kind of exhibition was less risky than a feminist art show since in spite of some resistance within the institution, this proposal was accepted. Organizing the exhibit and editing the catalog took a year and a half. We have to keep in mind that re-installling a museum collection is unlike mounting other types of exhibitions. The choice of work is necessarily limited and it reveals an institution's strengths as well as its weaknesses and gaps. But it's also an opportunity for a museum to enhance its collection with new acquisitions and by bringing in some new artists. Because of this, the re-installation of a permanent collection does more for the visibility of women artists than a single special exhibition would. It lasts longer and the works acquired become part of the permanent collection, so they can be exhibited later on in other contexts. For the curators (Camille Morineau, Emma Lavigne, Quentin Bajac, Cécile Debray, Valérie Guillaume), making women's art visible and acknowledging the diversity of their approaches were the main goals. When we realize that women's artwork only represents 13% of the work exhibited in the Musée national d'art moderne, using a "traditional" curatorial approach, we can see the utility of inverting that practice. On the one hand, we run the risk, as Emanuelle Lequeux suggests in *Le Monde,* of relegating women artists to a ghetto. Or on the other hand, as Camille Morineau argued in the same article, we can more effectively abolish the term "woman artist." Rather than isolating female artists in a ghetto, the exhibit took positive steps to address the paradoxical situation Joan Scott has identified. This is the dilemma where women have to "fight against exclusion and for universalism while acknowledging sexual difference – the very same difference that led to their exclusion in the first place!" Taking into account the problems young and not-so-young women artists have in getting recognition from decision-makers in the art world, just presenting women's work to the public so that people can assess its quality by themselves, without a filter, is probably a necessary first step. The tactic of dedicating a museum space to women artists seems to me to be more effective than the quota system advocated by some American activists. We know quite well that when women artists compete with men, their work is often underestimated or even ignored, either deliberately or unconsciously. It's the notorious glass ceiling.

Yet when one visits this collection-exhibition and strolls through the different galleries, one forgets rather quickly that all the artists are women; instead the eye is drawn to the esthetic aspects, the power of the work, the beauty and elegance of certain installations . . . If some of the pieces on display refer directly to feminine or feminist experiences, with images of women's bodies (Martha Rosler's "Semiotics of the Kitchen," Jana Sterbak's "Vanitas: robe de chair pour albinos anorexique," Valérie Belin's series of mannequins, Ghada Amer's "Big Pink Diagonal," etc.), the purpose is to expose stereotypes, question conventions of representation, problematize the

male gaze that usually renders these presumably female attributes. These works are transgressive, rigorous, with no intention to please, and are even sometimes violent, brutal and difficult to look at. Besides these, there are a number of paintings and installations that are more abstract or conceptual (Aurélie Nemours, Marthe Wery, Vera Molnar), that don't fit neatly into any gender classification, and without reading the identifying label, it would be quite hard to guess the sex of their maker.

In fact, women's artistic production is diverse, eclectic and prolific – a reflection of all that contemporary art has been in the past three decades. But the public has to see women's art; the art has to be exhibited in order to reveal this very simple fact.

This is the challenge that the exhibition has met very successfully – it is rich, varied, complex and entirely satisfying to the eye. It has a catalog and internet site (elles@centrepompidou.fr) thanks to a collaboration with the Institut national de l'audiovisuel that allow viewers to delve into the issues and learn more about contemporary women's movements. But if the Musée national d'art moderne meant to promote the inclusion of women artists in art history, this initiative can only happen once. To repeat it would be a sign of defeat.

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"The passers-by on the 5th floor"

"Pioneer women" are being presented on the fifth floor of the Pompidou Center in the exhibition "elles@centrepompidou." Under this generic titl**e,** works by Suzanne Valadon, Marie Laurencin, Maria Blanchard, Natalia Gontcharova, Sonia Delauney, Alice Halicka, Joan Mitchell, Maria Elena Viera da Silva, Dorothea Tanning, Hannah Höch, Frida Kahlo, Remedios Varo, Germaine Richier . . . photographs by Florence Henri, Gisèle Freund, Dora Maar, Germaine Krull, Laure Albin-Guillot, Claude Cahun, Lisette Model, Diane Arbus . . . and works by architect-designers Eileen Gray, Janette Laverrière, Alison Smithson . . . are exhibited in seven thematically organized rooms: Reflective, Objective, Women Warriors, Surrealists, Urban, Industrial, Abstract. The spaces themselves are scattered throughout a chronologically-organized exhibition of the work of the "great men" (as one might say quickly and ironically) of modern art: Duchamp, Picasso, Klee . . . Quickly because a few women are included along the way, so that if one wanted to see all the "shes" that the museum owns, one would have to seek them out room by room. The thought behind this is obvious: exhibit the work of women artists, certainly, but don't disrupt our chronological arrangement because visitors from around the world come to see the works by Matisse, Braque, Malevitch . . .

And that is where one confronts the limits of the exercise as well as the overall plan for the exhibition because considering this handful of rooms alongside the conventional museum visit seems to affirm the existence of a kind of "women's art" divorced from any context, apparently having developed outside the critically recognized movements in art history. Even the name "Pioneer Women" is incorrect; it erases all these women artists' predecessors, thereby returning them to a state of

utter invisibility; it ignores a few thousand other women artists, who were actively exhibiting in salons and galleries, although perhaps not in Paris. They were surely not pioneers, nor isolated either, nor unconcerned with esthetic questions, and one is astounded to find works by Alexandra Exter, Marianne Werefkin, Marlow Moss, Gabriele Münter, Barbara Hepworth, Anni Albers, Katarzyna Kobro . . . We could go on with the list. But such lists were drawn up more than a century ago by men and women who wanted to demonstrate the existence of women artists and to show their work. Still, as soon as the lists are established, they're forgotten since that really isn't the root of the problem.

And so, all of sudden one feels like calling out "Stop!" – let's remove this handful of galleries, bizarre excrescences, where women artists' work is segregated, and keep the conventional trajectory beloved of museum curators, historians and art critics of the end of the twentieth century. Let's preserve that as a museum piece, a psychic relic of that twentieth century; keep it for what it is, namely "a museum tour through the twentieth century" as conceptualized in the twentieth century. We have to accept that this view is a male-dominant one, that it speaks to us of passions, theories developed in the cafes, veterans returned from wars and their acts of revolt, hard liquor, cosmopolitan neighborhoods, female models of easy virtue. It also tells of the poverty at the beginnings of careers, the dealers who don't understand the work, and the institutions too. We can move from one "ism" to the next on this typical tour, from one school to the next, from a violation of the norm to a return to tradition, and the only cultural dialog we recognize in this history is the one between Europe and New York. Let's acknowledge that the myths of this particular construction of art history are the ones that we've absorbed throughout the twentieth century, since that is precisely what the contemporary artists exhibited on the fourth floor [of the Pompidou Center (trans.)] have been deconstructing. But most importantly, let's keep the classic museum presentation as it is because where else will we be able to understand the status of a public art collection as property, how it has been developed with curatorial expertise, and what it tells us about an epoch? The works in a collection were purchased in relation to each other, in keeping with that history. When we listen to the "great men" of the era, we learn that Marie Laurencin was nothing but a muse, just like Hannah Höch, Dora Maar . . . others were mothers or wives, such as Valadon, Sonia Delauney, Sophie Taeuber Arp, Halicka, . . . In the kind of art history where these women exist only in parentheses, they are the companions whose names are omitted from photo captions and museum wall labels; there's no room for them. To make room, one would not have merely bought one or two small paintings, but have tried instead, as has been done for the male artists in the collection, to evaluate them in the context of their work's development. We would have had to consider women artists' work as essential to understanding the art of an age, and not simply regard it as a curiosity or a sign of a particular period. Most of all, we will now have to imagine that other art histories are possible in the twenty-first century, and that the public too can appreciate and understand them.

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Femmes artistes/artistes femmes
Translated from the French by Nancy Cadet

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Notes

1. An exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art, Pompidou Center, Paris, France, from May 27, 2009 to June 2010.
2. Catherine Gonnard and Elisabeth Lebovici, *Femmes artistes, Artistes femmes* (Paris, 2007: Hazan)
3. "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution," the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California, March 4, 2007–July 16, 2007; "Global Feminisms," the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York, March 23, 2007–July 1, 2007; "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism," Museo de Belles Artes, Bilbao, Spain, June 11, 2007–September 9, 2007 [Translator's note].

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