

ARTICLES

Why Have  
There Ever  
Not Been  
Great  
Women  
Artists

# Honoring Linda Nochlin's Legacy

Linda Nochlin Memorial Panel, CAA 2018  
Introduction by Margo Hobbs, WCA President

When Linda Nochlin died in October 2017, the College Art Association invited the WCA to assemble a panel for the CAA Annual Conference in Los Angeles to honor her legacy as a founder of the field of feminist art history. Her 1971 article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" changed the discipline irreversibly: scholars ever since have had to take gender seriously as formative of an artist's career. Nochlin received the WCA's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002.

Curator and art historian Maura Reilly, who knew Nochlin well and edited *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader* (Thames & Hudson, 2015), co-chaired the CAA panel. We reached out to scholars whose perspectives would illuminate the depth and breadth of Nochlin's impact. Her writing is so fresh that it's hard to believe her groundbreaking essay was written fifty years ago, so it was critical that one of Nochlin's peers recall for us the dismal state of women in art and art history in the 1960s and 1970s. Modernism, Nochlin's home field from her early work on Courbet and Realism, and queer art history, which added sexuality to gender as a legitimate scholarly topic, were essential topics to address. Notably, Reilly, Patricia Mainardi, Peter Kalb, and Jongwoo Jeremy Kim are all Nochlin students. We present here distilled versions of the presentations from last February.

Cover design by Danielle Eubank. Design by Danielle Eubank, WCA Director. Edited by Margo Hobbs, WCA President, Karin Luner, WCA Director of Operations, and WCA Directors Janice Nesser-Chu and Susan King.



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Recognizing the contributions of women in the arts

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# Making Trouble: A Tribute to Linda Nochlin

by Maura Reilly

In 1988, Linda Nochlin famously argued that “feminist art history is there to make trouble, to call into question, to ruffle feathers in the patriarchal dovecotes.” She spent her entire professional career doing just that, making trouble, embodying the position of the maverick. She continually questioned academic assumptions of gender, race, and class—and, as such, transformed not only the discipline of art history, but academic investigations in general. She examined afresh the work of French painter and provocateur Gustave Courbet (*Courbet*, 2007); redefined Realism as an artistic style, from the 19th century to the present (*Style and Civilization: Realism*, 1998); revised art history to include women artists, as well as the analysis of representations of women by male canonical artists (*Women, Art, and Power & Other Essays*, 1989); produced countless monographic texts on male and female artists; and has contributed enormously influential thematic essays—most spectacularly, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971)—which rang down like a clarion call, challenging each new generation to assess changes in the conditions under which women artists work.

In a 2010 video shot by her grand-daughter Julie Trotta, Linda waxes poetic on that seminal text:

*It's the idea that there is something natural about our particular system that always needs to be pushed and examined, and from*

**“feminist art history is there to make trouble, to call into question, to ruffle feathers...”**

*every point of view, which is what I did in that article. I worked in sociology and art history and the history of institutions, in phenomenology and—you just keep banging at your subject in a dialectical way, which means you go—dialectic is like, like prize fighting, it's upper cut, bong on the head and you pick the person up and throw them on the floor. Well, it's not quite, but it is a kind of dialectical method of thinking. Not a straight line where this leads to this leads to this, but this way, and that way, and then synthesis and from that you keep going, and that's why that article works, because you don't stop anywhere, there's not any one thing and yet it's precise in its details, and that is very important.*

The clip offers a wonderful insight into her mind—explaining how systems and disciplines always need to be pushed and examined from every point of view, that we need to “keep at it” in a dialectical way—like prize fighters taking on a subject from every angle. Like Hegel's notion of dialectical thinking when a collision of ideas creates a new truth or new synthesis. (An interesting aside: Nochlin's major at Vassar College in the late '40s was philosophy; art history was her minor.)

During the course of her lifetime, Nochlin published dozens of books and innumerable articles on subjects as varied as Realism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Pop Art, and, of course, Feminism. Her final book, which appeared posthumously on shelves in April of 2018,

focused on the subject of “misery” in 19th century art, and in 2015, she published a large collection of her writings on feminism and women artists, titled *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader* (Thames & Hudson, 2015), which I had the pleasure of editing.

Among Nochlin’s many scholarly contributions, she was also a visionary curator, having organized three milestone exhibitions, including the landmark *Women Artists, 1550–1950* in 1976 (LACMA), and, *Courbet Reconsidered* (Brooklyn Museum), co-curated with Sarah Faunce, and more recently, *Global Feminisms* (Brooklyn Museum), which we co-curated to coincide with the opening of the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art in 2007.

Nochlin was also an extraordinary teacher, having taught art history at Vassar College, CUNY, Yale, and lastly at the prestigious Institute of Fine Arts, from which she had received her doctorate in 1963. I had the pleasure and great fortune of studying with Linda, who served as my advisor on both my MA and PhD from the IFA. When asked through the years what I studied at the IFA, I often jokingly reply, “Well, I studied with Linda Nochlin.” And those of us that did so know exactly what I mean. To have studied with Linda Nochlin means that you, too, were taught a dialectical way of thinking about the world, and looking at art, one that was rooted in ideas of social justice, equality, and democratic values. She encouraged us to continually query academic assumptions, to challenge authoritative thinking, and to always, always look at a work of art with a feminist lens—be it a work by Courbet, Warhol or Sherman. To have studied with Linda Nochlin also meant that you would inevitably produce scholarship that was counter-hegemonic, that would (or had the capacity) to rabble rouse, thereby continuing her legacy of irreverence, of playfulness, and transgression.

For my part, I have dedicated my career to art in/from the margins and have fought to ensure that large constituencies of marginalized artists are no longer ignored or erased from arts’ histories; and to providing a platform for a multitude of voices,

not simply the elite few. Like Linda, my aim as a scholar has been to make trouble and I will continue to do so... “to ruffle the feathers in the patriarchal dovecotes.” For me, that is how I honor Linda, and that is how I believe we all can carry her heavy torch.

We must:

Challenge assumptions

Be bold

Talk back

Be irreverent and anti-establishment


And consistently make trouble...knowing that Linda is somewhere out there, vodka martini in hand, Bach playing in the background, donning cool sunglasses, and a huge smile of pride on her face, knowing that her work is done, and that it continues with all of us. 



Illustration: *ARTnews*, January 1971. Marie-Denise Villers, *Portrait of Charlotte du Val d'Ognes*, 1801, Metropolitan Museum of Art.