

responsibility upon the artist as part of the élite that would lead society through to a new world. Saint-Simonism thus provided Bonheur with a model of activity both as a woman and as an artist. Bonheur won considerable success as a professional artist—she was made a member of the coveted Légion d'Honneur. The award was given for her paintings, drawings and sculptures of animals, whose anatomy, unlike that of the human figure, she was able to study. She dissected carcasses in slaughterhouses and observed animals at work in the fields and in her own private menagerie.

Bonheur's work as an animal and landscape painter was part of a development in French painting in the first half of the nineteenth century—the establishment of a romantic-naturalist landscape and genre painting movement known as the Barbizon School. Within this group the other major animal painter was Constant Troyon (fig. 23). His paintings of watering cattle and woodlands bathed in subtle atmospheric effects of light observed at different times of the day represent a lyrical and idyllic tendency within the Barbizon School. Bonheur's treatment of animals was, however, more energetic. She represented animals at work, as in the painting which was her first major public success, *Ploughing in the Nivernais* (1848, Fontainebleau, Musée Nationale du Chateau de Fontainebleau). *The Horse Fair* (fig. 24), completed for the Paris Salon of 1853, was the largest canvas an animal painter had produced. (Size was still a matter of prestige and was usually reserved for history paintings—though this had been questioned by Courbet's paintings in the Salon of 1850–1.) *The Horse Fair* combines the heroic mode of earlier Romantic treatments of horses by such artists as Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), for whom the horse was the embodiment of energy, power and virility, with the more contemporary naturalist concerns for atmospheres and effects of light.

However, despite the growing public for this kind of painting, and the relatively-easier access an artist such as Bonheur had to the study of her animal models, her practice was constrained by other factors—by notions of propriety and the confinement of women to the private and domestic sphere. In order to make the preliminary studies for *The Horse Fair* Bonheur had to visit the Paris horse market. To do this without harassment or danger on account of being a woman in such a public place, she dressed in men's clothing—for which she had to get legal authorisation. Thus in order to paint scenes outside the domestic sphere she had to disguise her sex. For as a member of the female sex, an artist was subject to the constraints bourgeois society was increasingly placing on women's activities and movements.

The practice of women artists was increasingly determined in the nineteenth century by the consolidation of bourgeois society and its ideologies of femininity—the natural essence of womanhood sustained and reproduced

through the location of women in the home and identification of women with domesticity. Later in the nineteenth century the Impressionist movement turned away from bourgeois classicism and history painting to genre scenes of contemporary modern life which included scenes of bourgeois leisure and family life. Moreover they rejected official institutions and established their own exhibition society to which a number of women artists were drawn. With the Impressionist group, Berthe Morisot (1841-95) and Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) not only found a more congenial environment for their radical art politics, but, because of the Impressionist ethos of 'modernity', they were able to draw upon their direct experiences of the circumscribed lives of bourgeois women in the family as subject matter for their artistic practice. However, the contradictions they experienced as women and artists, though comparable in some ways to those experienced by earlier generations of women artists, were magnified by the rigid social roles and definitions of femininity constructed within bourgeois society.

The passage from girlhood to womanhood fascinated both male and female writers and artists in the nineteenth century but with significant differences. For women the onset of puberty was the onset of their bondage; for male writers it was the moment of the mystery of femininity. Morisot frequently painted adolescent girls, often with great poignancy, as in the numerous portraits of her daughter. In *Psyche* (fig. 25), a young girl dresses in front of a mirror, also known in French as *psyché*, but pauses in private reverie, for which the title provides some clues. *Psyche* was the mortal who fell in love with Cupid and aroused the jealousy of Venus. Her unhappy state finally won the compassion of Venus and she was reunited with Cupid. The theme of awakening sexuality and young love had attracted Romantic artists to the story. Morisot's painting, however, strips the story of its classical garb and offers a contemporary *Psyche*, half-dressed, in brilliant whites, in a boudoir, looking at herself, her adolescent sexuality subdued, turned in on itself, private, dreamy.

Cassatt was far more radical in her examination of the phases of women's lives and the social and ideological constraints within which they lived. (For a full-length study of this artist, see G. Pollock, *Mary Cassatt*, London, 1980.) Cassatt was an American, an expatriate who had chosen to live in France for her working life because she felt that Europe offered more opportunities than her native country for a woman to do serious work, in her own words, 'to be someone not something'. She was not only a supporter of women's campaigns for political emancipation, but she herself stated in letters that her involvement with the struggle of independent artists against the Salon and its jury system was a political commitment to the causes of freedom. This radicalism is apparent, moreover, both in the subjects she chose to paint and

the way in which she painted them. In her works Cassatt critically analysed the life of bourgeois women from infancy to old age in such a way that their acquisition of 'femininity' is exposed as a social process, not as the essence of womanliness, ideologically imputed to women as their nature, but a result of their introduction into place in the social order. The way in which she represented these processes is crucial. Her bold and decisive style effectively subverted traditional images of women, the mother and female child, for instance.

Because her subject matter was drawn—of social necessity—from the world of women in which she lived as an unmarried daughter of a bourgeois family, because she addressed herself to the stages of women's lives—as young girls, mothers, matrons, in families, in the domestic sphere—her paintings are easily mis-recognized. Instead of being seen as a radical critique of dominant ideologies, they are used as confirmation of them. Yet even in those works depicting a woman engaged in what was in the nineteenth century *the* feminine domestic activity, 'woman's work', embroidery, Cassatt's treatment undermines that ideology. In *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* (fig. 26) the composition is boldly painted and presents a picture of a woman absorbed in work. But the woman and her work are placed in a confined space, enclosed. That containment is almost brutally broken and aggressively thrown at the spectator by the way in which the wooden embroidery frame threatens to break out of the flat plane of the painting. This is but one example of the way in which Cassatt manipulated space and compositional structure to endow what women did in the home with respect and seriousness, while at the same time being able to make us recognize the limitations resulting from the confinement of bourgeois women in the domestic sphere alone.

Morisot had participated in the first group exhibition of those artists who were collectively dubbed 'Impressionists' in 1874. Manet and her old teacher, Guichard, advised her strongly against joining forces with 'those madmen' and risking general derision by withdrawing from the official institutions of art such as the Salon. At first Morisot shared the critical abuse poured by some on the independents, but once the group established its own circle of dealers, patrons and critics, Morisot was spoken of stereotypically as a 'women Impressionist', or, with the other women in the group, Mary Cassatt, Eva Gonzales and Marie Bracquemond, as an exponent of 'feminine Impressionism'. However, various writers on Impressionism placed Morisot in a central position within that movement. Some even hailed her as the only true Impressionist. But their praise of Morisot depended on the constant association of Impressionism with a certain notion of femininity based on intimations of subtle sensibility, nuance and suggestiveness. This is interesting for, in so far as femininity was used as a critical category to some extent independent of the gender of the

practitioner—men's work too could share these qualities—we can perceive more clearly of what qualities the category 'feminine' is composed. However, the critics still tried to detect some biological connection between the presence of certain qualities in Morisot's work and the artist's sex. But just as important is another aspect of this critical response to Morisot which elided her sex, her 'eternal feminine', with her social class. Roger-Marx wrote of a talent developed 'in complete quietude, according to the logic of sex, temperament and social class' (*Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1907, p. 508) and he supported this with reference to the novel *Chérie* (1884) by the de Goncourt brothers in which a fascination with the artifice and elegance of the life of the haute bourgeoisie is represented by the study of a female child in that milieu.

These contemporary critics were attempting to find something to say for women's art. But, more often than not, they lost sight of the individual artist in their overriding notion of femininity. In an appreciative essay on Berthe Morisot, *Sex in Art* (1890), George Moore exposed all the contradictions and uneasy manoeuvres of a thoroughly bourgeois Victorian struggling to come to terms with paintings that genuinely moved him:

Madame Lebrun painted well, but she invented nothing, she failed to make her own of any special manner of seeing and rendering things; she failed to create a style. Only one woman did this, and that woman is Madame Morisot, and her pictures are the only pictures painted by a woman that could not be destroyed without creating a blank, a hiatus in the history of art. True that hiatus would be slight—insignificant if you will—but the insignificant is sometimes dear to us; and though nightingales, thrushes and skylarks were to sing in King's Bench Walk, I should miss the individual chirp of the pretty sparrow.

Madame Morisot's note is perhaps as insignificant as a sparrow's, but it is an unique and individual note. She has created a style, and has done so by investing her art with all her femininity; her art is no dull parody of ours; it is all womanhood—sweet and gracious, tender and wistful womanhood. (pp. 228–9)

We may be tempted to smile at Moore's evident confusion. However, we should not minimize the destructive effects of such condescension and its assertion of a categorical difference between masculine and feminine. The *Correspondence* (ed. Rouart, 1957) of Berthe Morisot provides the necessary and saddening corrective. It underlines the potency of Victorian ideology which denied women a belief in themselves more powerfully than had mere institutional discrimination or exclusion from academic education.

Morisot came from an haut-bourgeois family with three daughters all of

whom wanted to study art. Initially their parents complied with their wishes for it was thoroughly acceptable for a lady to be 'accomplished' as a sketcher or watercolourist. Their first drawing master, Guichard, disturbed by the obviously serious ambitions of his three pupils, wrote to their mother:

Your daughters have such inclinations that my teaching will not give them merely the talent of pleasing; they will become painters. Do you know what this means? In your environment . . . this will be a revolution, if not a catastrophe. (A. Mongan, *Berthe Morisot*, 1961, p. 12)

Undeterred, the Morisot sisters demanded more and better instruction and became for a short time the pupils of Camille Corot, one of the leading landscape painters of the Barbizon School. However, the haut-bourgeois environment soon claimed the eldest, Yves, whose marriage denied her further access to art practice. Though Edme was considered the most gifted by her teachers, her career was also cut short. What Guichard's warning had failed to check, marriage soon halted, for on her marriage in 1869 Edme Morisot was obliged by social convention to abandon all painting but pastiches of her younger sister's work. Shortly afterwards she wrote sadly to Berthe, revealing her sense of loss:

I am often with you in my thoughts; I follow you everywhere in your studio and I wish that I could escape, were it only for one quarter of an hour to breathe again that air in which we lived. (B. Morisot, *Correspondence*, 1957, p. 27)

Berthe Morisot's reply to her unhappy sister is yet more depressing. It reveals how difficult it was for a woman of their class to believe in herself as an artist, despite her continuing professional practice and evident determination. Her response is witness to the way women internalized Victorian definitions of the nature of Woman. A kind of psychological indoctrination replaced the clumsy weapons of institutional discrimination:

This painting, this work you mourn for, is the cause of many griefs and troubles. . . . Come now, the lot you have chosen is not the worst one. You have a serious attachment and a man's heart totally devoted to you. Do not revile your fate. Remember it is sad to be alone and despite anything that may be said or done, a woman has an immense need of affection. For her to withdraw within herself is to attempt the impossible. (*Ibid.*, p. 28)

The appalling poignancy of such language is paralleled pictorially in Morisot's *Self-portrait* of 1885 (Fig. 27). Morisot depicted herself at the age of

forty-four, after more than eleven years of professional, respected work. Yet this self-portrait is a supremely defensive image: the expression is tentative through the veil of light pastel, and the face hovers uncertainly on the paper, partially obscured by dark shadow. The drawing's physical delicacy, the immaterial dust of coloured chalks, inscribe into the language of art itself the confusions a nineteenth-century woman artist experienced. While using the excellence of her own skill as a painter, she presented her conflicted sense of identity as woman and artist.

III

By the late nineteenth century, Victorian historians of art could rightly record the persistent presence of women in the history of art and note their growing numbers and gradual progress in the face of problems such as institutional exclusion and lack of recognition. In 1876 Clayton talked confidently of these 'latter pleasant days' when more women than ever worked in the fine arts, had won access to Academy schools or set up their own places of art education and were able to participate in avant-garde circles. Yet these practical developments were in fact Pyrrhic victories. The consolidation of the bourgeois social system and its ideologies increasingly isolated women from both participation in and recognition as part of the mainstream of social and cultural production. Victorian writings on 'Women Artists' simultaneously recorded the existence of women artists and laid the foundations for their obliteration. Because women artists were treated, as were all women, collectively as a homogeneous group by virtue of their shared gender, and separately from artists of a different gender, women were effectively placed in an absolutely different sphere from men. Thus art by women was subsumed into bourgeois notions of femininity and furthermore, art historically, relegated to a special category which was presented as distinct from mainstream cultural activity and public professionalism—the preserve of masculinity. Thus at the very moment of a numerical increase in the numbers of women artists working professionally, women artists were represented as different, distinct and separate on account of their sex alone.

In the twentieth century women artists have to struggle against these dominant bourgeois notions of sexual difference which emerged in the nineteenth century. However, a new and significant factor is the discipline of art history itself with its related critical and curatorial practices. For modern art history has not only inherited and perpetuated Victorian ideologies of femininity and notions of women's art as categorically different from men's. These positions have solidified and in place of Victorian notions of separate but

(un)equal, however contradictory those were, modern art history produces a picture of the history of art from which women are not only absent, but identifies women artists as inevitably and *naturally* artists of lesser talent and no historical significance.

IV

With the rise of the modern women's movement, feminist artists, critics and art historians have begun to question the neglect of women artists and the stereotyped dismissal of women's art. Important work has been done in the past few years. Hundreds of women artists have been documented and the art historical establishment's limited vision of the entire history of art has been exposed. Two major trends in feminist thought can be identified, neither very satisfactory. We have been caught too often in reacting against the dominant notions about women's art and have tended only to exchange one set of stereotypes for another. And, in the attempt to make art history take notice of women artists, we have submerged them once again in a slightly reformed but still traditional notion of history.

Myths about creativity and the limiting, distorting way art historians write about the past have deep roots in our social structure and ideologies. They are powerful and pervasive and the feminist attempt to challenge them is rendered difficult precisely because we have been produced within the dominant social order. Some of the very real traps and contradictions can be illustrated by analysing the main tendencies in feminist literature, not simply to criticise but rather to suggest some of the dead-ends which many feminists, ourselves included, have come up against in trying to challenge existing ideologies and practices.

Confronted with the complacent ignorance of the art historical establishment, feminist art historians are obliged to prove the very existence of women artists. Reacting to this provocation, feminists rummage in dusty basements and return to ancient sources in search of 'Old Mistresses' to rescue them from undeserved neglect and re-establish their reputations, justifying their research, however, according to the establishment's criteria. Eleanor Tufts's *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists* (1974) is representative of this reformist trend. She writes in her introduction:

I hope this book, by presenting a selection of outstanding women artists over five centuries will constitute the beginning of a redress of balance As our hidden heritage of women artists becomes more apparent and solidly annexed to the main stream of history, we might look forward to

monographs on the artists perused here and a closer scrutiny of all artists throughout the centuries. (pp. xv and xvii)

Tufts's book aimed to redress the neglect and omission of women artists from the sixteenth century onwards by providing twenty-two mini-monographs. She anticipated that her initial researches would inspire more extended monographs on these and other women painters and sculptors. However, on the evidence and model provided by her book such studies would only serve to reproduce, with the slight difference of women in the place of men, the concentration on the isolated individual artist and an exclusively stylistic account typical of current art historical practices represented in the monographic format, and its emphases and limitations. Moreover, Tufts's text suggests that women artists, thus partially retrieved, are to be *annexed* to the mainstream of art history. Women will thus on the one hand be integrated and absorbed into existing fields of historical knowledge through the established channels and formats. On the other, they are to be absorbed simply as additions. In her haste to insert women into the current patterns and curricula of the discipline, the specific factors affecting women's work and its varying differences from men's, as well as other perspectives from which one has to analyse the historical process in order to comprehend women's activities within their particular contexts, are avoided or overlooked.

This determination to relocate women in art history on the discipline's own terms culminated in the United States during 1976 with a huge exhibition and a scholarly book *Women Artists 1550-1950* by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris. Sutherland Harris concludes her introductory essay with this statement:

Slowly these artists must be integrated into their art historical context. For too long they have either been omitted altogether, or isolated and discussed only as women, not simply as artists as if in some strange way they were not part of their culture at all. This exhibition will be a success if it helps remove once and for all the justification of any future exhibitions with this theme. (p. 44)

The intention is thus to bring to an end the separate categorisation of women artists. However, it is clear that the authors subscribe to a slightly modified, but none the less conventional notion of art history, its system of values and criteria of significance. So perhaps inevitably their initially admirable intentions are ultimately betrayed by academic conservatism and defensiveness. For instance, in so far as Nochlin and Sutherland Harris feel obliged to offer justification for women's inclusion in art history books and courses, they not

only acknowledge, but also reinforce, existing systems of values established from men's work against which women artists have to be measured. But, more significantly, because they cannot accept the fact that the existence and activity of women in art throughout history is of itself a sufficient justification for historical enquiry, they offer reasons for women's inclusion in existing forms of art history on grounds that are spurious in terms of the discipline itself. A comment on Anguissola, for instance, is revealing:

And *even if* Sofonisba Anguissola's contribution to Renaissance portraiture does not earn her a place in the Renaissance chapter, her historical impact as the first woman artist to become a celebrity and thereby open up the profession to women surely does. (p. 44, our italics)

By treating Anguissola only as an interesting novelty, the really interesting questions are ignored. To what extent must our understanding of the Renaissance be altered in view of the fact that such a painter as Anguissola was considered worthy of note by her contemporaries? What different kinds of portraits did she produce because she was a woman and of noble birth as opposed to those painted by her male contemporaries? Anguissola the artist is not allowed to expand our understanding of her period. The woman artist is merely to be added as an interesting celebrity whose importance lies only in her pioneering role for a sub-group, women.

Such a process loses sight of the particularity of women's participation in a given period in an attempt to make them acceptable to current art history. Some feminists do recognize that art history needs to be modified in order to understand women's different circumstances. Linda Nochlin herself wrote in an earlier article:

A feminist critique of the discipline of art history is needed which can pierce cultural-ideological limitations to reveal biases and inadequacies *not only in regard to the question of women artists, but the formulation of crucial questions of the discipline as a whole*. Thus the so-called woman question, far from being a peripheral sub-issue, can become a catalyst, a potent intellectual instrument probing the most basic and 'natural' assumptions, providing a paradigm for other kinds of internal questioning, and providing links with paradigms in other fields. ('Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', *Art and Sexual Politics*, ed. E. Baker and T. Hess, 1973, p. 2)

According to Nochlin's statement the feminist critique is validated *because* it sets off long-needed reforms. But as we shall argue, a radical reform, if not a

total deconstruction of the present structure of the discipline is needed *in order to* arrive at a real understanding of the history of women and art.

While many feminists are caught in the trap of merely reacting against the monolithic art historical dismissal of women, attempting to justify their reconsideration without seriously questioning the basis of art history's practice and values, others over-react and reject any form of art historical analysis. They do not look at women's precise place in history, nor do they undertake pictorial analysis of works by women in relation to their historical period. This tendency can be seen in *Women Artists: Recognition and Re-Appraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, by K. Petersen and J. J. Wilson, who make a fair criticism: 'The danger of having a fixed, or unexamined, art history perspective is that it all too frequently predisposes us to look only at certain kinds of art, to see only superstars, chosen by biased criteria' (pp. 6-7). But in so far as Petersen and Wilson then compile an amplified dictionary of women artists, the art produced by women is still effectively left in the separate category the Victorians constructed, a tendency their title, *Women Artists*, reinforces. Of course, the authors would not accept a Victorian notion of an essential 'femininity' but, because women artists are lumped together in one book without sufficient attention to their diverse and particular historical contexts, the book gives the impression that there is a fundamental link between women artists down the ages simply because they are of the same gender.

In order to avoid that particular trap some feminists are tempted to discount the possibility of any distinctive feature resulting from their gender in women's art at all. Thus women's work is offered merely as a few more examples of mainstream styles, 'Impressionist', 'Realist', 'Surrealist' or 'Abstract'. However, any argument that proposes 'art has no sex' ignores the difference of men's and women's experience of the social structures of class and the sexual divisions within our society, and its historically varied effects on the art men and women produce.

The strategies adopted by feminists have been enormously important. Most significantly the conventional biologicistic accounts of women's art or 'natural' explanations for women's supposed absence from the history of art have been shown to be fallacious. Feminist art history to date has redressed twentieth-century neglect and omission. Some have accomplished this only by refusing to acknowledge the specific conditions of women's artistic practice. Others, admittedly with slight shifts of emphasis, have merely returned us to the position bequeathed by the Victorians. Women artists remain an entirely separate category.

The more radical attempts to avoid Victorianism often turn to sociologically based accounts of the obstacles and institutional forms of discrimination

women artists have encountered. They are ultimately handicapped by the unaltered perspectives and unquestioned value systems within which their work is constituted. Such a sociologically oriented approach is the product of the equal rights movement in feminist politics in the early 1970s which attacked forms of social and economic discrimination against women. While these struggles for equal opportunities have produced some reforms, they leave intact and unexamined the social and ideological structures of which discrimination is but a symptom.

In 1972 Linda Nochlin published an essay entitled 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?'. Leaving aside for the moment the troubled question of 'true greatness', defined by whom and with what criteria, the very question itself is revealing, for it implies a negative. As Nochlin rightly points out, it can only be answered by defensive explanations. However, she herself stated that there have not been great women artists. And she concentrated on explanations for this absence based on institutional exclusion, restrictions on training and conflicting attitudes to women's professional activity. But if these social or institutional restraints had indeed been effective, or, more importantly, were the central cause of women's 'problems' in art practice, the only logical conclusions one could draw would be that there should have been no women artists at all. However, since there have always been women artists, the issue is rather how they worked despite these restraints. Furthermore, in many cases women have produced really interesting work as much because of as despite their different relation to the structures that officially excluded them.

The issues have thus to be reformulated. Women artists have always existed. They worked consistently and in growing numbers despite discrimination. Each woman's work is different, determined by the specific factors of sex, class and place in particular historical periods. Women have made their own interventions in the forms and languages of art because they are necessarily part of their society and culture. But because of the economic, social and ideological effects of sexual difference in a western, patriarchal culture, women have spoken and acted from a different place within that society and culture.

The most signal omission of feminist art history to date is our failure to analyse *why* modern art history ignores the existence of women artists, why it has become silent about them, why it has consistently dismissed as insignificant those it did acknowledge. To confront these questions enables us to identify the unacknowledged ideology which informs the practice of this discipline and the values which decide its classification and interpretations of all art.