

Why Have There Been No Great Women's Art Collections?

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Abstract

Looking to Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" as an establishing framework, this paper is a critical examination of the historic and current systemic structures that have led to a disparity in representation of women artists actively collected within art institutions. This paper will demonstrate that collections of work by women artists, including work that has been categorically identified as "great" within a contemporary critical discourse, do exist. Examining the collections of art patrons Valeria Napoleone and Linda Lee Alter, and their initiatives to promote visibility of women artists within partner institutions, provides two case studies in the positive work being done to highlight the work of women artists today. Because institutional collections are the foundations upon which history is written, it is crucial that a more diverse range of participants within the systemic structures that support collecting be represented and inscribed as a basis for a more diverse understanding of contemporary society.

i. Introduction

This paper's title, the question "Why have there been no great women's art collections?" follows art historian Linda Nochlin's question "Why have there been no great women artists?" Nochlin's essay, originally published in the January 1971 issue of *ARTnews*, appeared when feminism in the United States was on the rise within mainstream culture. Through asking the question, "why have there been no great women artists?" Nochlin examines the institutional structures that have prevented women artists from becoming inscribed within art history's canon. Written in a moment of upward momentum for the broader feminist cultural movement in the US, the essay acted as a catalyst for further inquiry into a feminist art history. Nochlin's work has since prompted a series of investigations into the place of women artists in the art world.

Looking to "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" as an establishing framework, this paper is a critical examination of the historic and current systemic structures examined by Nochlin in her essay—from education to the art market, as well as gendered preconceptions and practices informing women's art making and collecting the products of their labor. These structures have led to a disparity in representation of women artists actively collected on the market and within art institutions. In the 1980s The Guerilla Girls, an anonymous collective of women artists, began their practice of exposing discrimination within many of these structures against women artists and artists of color. Other individuals and groups have continued the kind of work established by The Guerilla Girls—this paper utilizes some of the statistics compiled by Gallery Tally and Gallery Artist Reform LA, as well as additional statistics compiled by the author. Taking from Nochlin's title to form the question "Why have there been no great women's art collections?" is admittedly a provocation rather than a determination, as this paper will demonstrate that collections of work by women artists, including work that has been categorically identified as "great" within

a contemporary critical discourse, do exist. Examining the collections of art patrons Valeria Napoleone and Linda Lee Alter, and their initiatives to promote visibility of women artists within partner institutions, provides two case studies in the positive work being done to highlight the work of women artists today.

While this paper looks foremost to Nochlin's art historical writing, it looks also to other cultural critics examining gendered practices in collecting and production. Russell Belk and Melanie Wallendorf's essay "Of Mice and Men: Gender Identity and Collecting" provides insight into the reasons we collect and how gender identification contributes to a gendered collection. Gayle Davis' essay "Gender and Creative Production: A Social History Lesson in Art Evaluation" emphasizes the arguments made by Nochlin within the context of evaluating work by women artists, leading to or keeping from their inclusion within institutional collections.

Using these cultural critics to reinforce Nochlin's initial premise, this paper further establishes a basis for understanding some of the reasons why women artists have historically been less represented in institutional collections, tracing the progress made from Nochlin's critique of a gendered disparity within the art world to today. As a matter of clarity, because this paper investigates gender bias within the discipline of art collecting and not art production per se, the term "collection-worthy" is used in various parts of this argument as a means of distinction when referring to the concept of "greatness" as espoused by Nochlin. Further, this paper points to current trends that indicate a process of correcting the institutional imbalance as examined by the Nochlin, Belk, Wallendorf, and Davis, and proposes that because institutional collections are the foundations upon which history is written, it is crucial that a more diverse range of participants within the systemic structures that support collecting, be represented and inscribed as a basis for a more diverse understanding of contemporary society. Recognizing that race, religion, sexual orientation

and many other identifications representing minority demographics have also been underrepresented in institutional art collections, it would be impossible within the limits of this paper to undertake such a broad examination. Focusing on gender as just one example of institutional responsibility to be remedied among many nevertheless highlights the work still to be done, while also pointing to the ways this work can begin to be accomplished.

ii. **Why have there been no great women artists?**

Linda Nochlin identifies several factors contributing to the rarity of women in the art historical canon, beginning with what she terms the “Woman Problem.”¹ She elaborates that “[t]he problem lies... with [the] misconception... of what art is: with the naïve idea that art is the direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience.... Art is almost never that, great art never is.”² Failing to recognize the labor, practice and skills required in the creation of art in a misconstrued effort to define what great art is does a great disservice to recognizing women artists, who have historically been left out of opportunities to practice the skills required for creative activities or have their artistic production recognized as work. This misconception of what art is leads to the myth of the Great Artist. Nochlin notes that “[u]nderlying the question of woman as artist, then, we find the myth of the Great Artist...bearing within his person since birth a mysterious essence...which, like murder, must always out, no matter how unlikely or unpromising the circumstances.”³ The myth of the Great Artist goes hand in hand with the idea that great art is a direct, personal

¹ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” in *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*, 1st ed, Icon Editions (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 151.

² Nochlin, 149.

³ Nochlin, 153.

expression of individual emotional experience, devoid of any actual applied effort that critics and collectors today should know well enough make up the pragmatic work of art making.

Several factors leaving women artists out of the canon are less ideological misconceptions than attested practices that have historically prevented women from gaining the skills that would allow them to become perceived as categorically great. To begin with, Nochlin notes that “one might be forced to admit that a large proportion of artists, great and not-so-great, in the days when it was normal for sons to follow in their fathers’ footsteps, had artist fathers.”⁴ This practical observation calls attention to the issue of access faced by aspiring women artists, beginning from within their own familial structures. Rarely are daughters encouraged to pursue a profession with the same degree of enthusiasm as has historically been documented with fathers and their sons. Another issue of access is what Nochlin terms “The Question of the Nude.”⁵ The form of the nude was long held as the form that best conveys greatness in art, and preventing women from gaining the skills to produce work in this genre, through preventing women artists access to life modeling classes with nude models, is one of the ways that women artists have been prevented from being perceived as capable of greatness. Nochlin explains that “The Lady’s Accomplishment”⁶ has often factored women out of the ability to achieve greatness in any one skill. Instead of being encouraged to master any one discipline, women historically, and even today, have been encouraged to be good enough at several creative pursuits. Many of the practical aspects determining women artists’ access to opportunities have shifted in the years since Nochlin’s writing. However, because of the historic precedents preventing women artists access to these structures, the rhetoric surrounding great work and great artists—work and

⁴ Nochlin, 156.

⁵ Nochlin, 158.

⁶ Nochlin, 164.

artists worthy of collection within an institutional context—has changed very little, resulting in an ongoing disparity of women artists within institutional art collections today.

iii. Gender Identity and Collecting

Many of the challenges identified by Nochlin find parallels in Russell Belk & Melanie Wallendorf's discussion of gender identity and collecting. Whereas Nochlin's argument comes from an art historical point of view and aims to question that discipline's convention of denying recognition to women artists, Belk and Wallendorf outline many of the ways that gender plays into the categorization of collectors and their collections. While not explicitly implicating bias in their discussion, the parallels to Nochlin's argument draw out how collections gendered as female have been written off as less significant than their masculine counterparts.

In "Of Mice and Men: Gender Identity and Collecting," Belk and Wallendorf argue that collections are ultimately compiled as a means of expressing or understanding oneself. Parallels between Belk and Wallendorf's discussion of gender in collecting practices and Linda Nochlin's discussion of gendered discrimination against women within the institutions of artistic practice serve to highlight some of the reasons for a lack of representation of women artists within institutional collections today.

Gender is recognized in four specific aspects of the collecting process identified by Belk and Wallendorf. The first to be identified by the authors is "the gendered associations of various traits connected to collecting."⁷ To further this point they rely upon an argument made by Brenda Danet and Tamara Katriel, noting that "[s]ince collecting is a proactive form of behavior which develops a sense of mastery, it is very likely that males will therefore be

⁷ Russel W. Belk and Melanie Wallendorf, "Of Mice and Men: Gender Identity and Collecting," in *The Material Culture of Gender-The Gender of Material Culture*, 1997, 8-9.

more involved in it than females.”⁸ This characterization of the act of collecting as a masculine approach because of the requirement of mastery very much echoes the gendered bias toward appropriate kinds of women’s work Nochlin identifies in her discussion of “The Lady’s Accomplishment.” Women in society have historically been discouraged from mastery of any one discipline, including collecting. Attempts at mastery of any one practice outside of a familial service was (and often still is) seen to be selfish.⁹ Women, therefore, have been less likely to become collectors. Belk and Wallendorf point out that that “women still are seen in the primary role of consumers;”¹⁰ as a result, women collectors have been perceived to be accumulating goods as opposed to cultivating serious and significant collections.

The second aspect of collecting identified by Belk and Wallendorf is “the gender of objects collected.”¹¹ Decorative objects for example—embroidery, furniture, and commercial objects intended for domestic use—have been more traditionally acceptable as objects worthy of inclusion in women’s collections. These kinds of objects, generally produced on a larger scale and with some use value in mind, underscore the identification of women collectors as consumers. It seems no accident that the kinds of creative objects that have been deemed acceptable for collection by women are the same kinds of items that have historically been deemed acceptable for a woman artist’s creative production. Items more generally identified as masculine, however—painting, sculpture and items produced on a grand scale—are conveniently those that are most valued as masterpieces, items judged to be those of historical relevance and demonstrating the qualities of artistic genius.

⁸ Belk and Wallendorf, 10.

⁹ Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” 164-166.

¹⁰ Belk and Wallendorf, “Of Mice and Men,” 9.

¹¹ Belk and Wallendorf. 8-9.

Belk and Wallendorf's third identifiable gendered aspect of collecting is "the use of collections to construct gender identity."¹² This stands out as perhaps the most consequential in terms of a bias against women artists within institutional collections. If men, or individuals who identify with masculine traits, are the most influential cultivators (as curators, directors or other high-ranking administrators within collecting institutions¹³) of collections within collecting institutions, the items they seek to acquire for the collections in their care will reinforce these traits. Alternatively, women will collect work they see as reaffirming their identity. This aspect of collecting is crucial to understanding the ways in which the problem of gendered bias can be addressed—incorporating a more diverse staff will inevitably lead to more diverse collections within institutions.

The final aspect of gendered collecting identified by Belk and Wallendorf is "the gendered societal functions served by collecting."¹⁴ Associating supposedly feminine collections with sentiment as opposed to masculine collections which are designed to demonstrate a control over nature, this point essentially reinforces the notion that mastery is a masculine pursuit that leaves women's collecting practices to be viewed as less consequential. When viewed in the context of societal functions, feminine collections, teeming with sentiment, would seem appropriate only for a small, familiar audience while masculine collections are able to serve a broad audience, inspiring awe and wonder at their mastery. Further to this ultimate observation by Belk and Wallendorf, the question of placing value seems crucial. How does society place value on collections and the work they contain? If institutional collections have historically been primarily cultivated by men,

¹² Belk and Wallendorf, 8-9.

¹³ Guerrilla Girls, "Get the Facts" (National Museum of Women in the Arts, n.d.). "Get the Facts" cites a statistic provided by the Association of American Art Museum Directors, that only 30% of the largest museums have women directors.

¹⁴ Belk and Wallendorf, "Of Mice and Men."

resulting in collections containing work by artists who underscore their sense of masculinity, how does that affect society's perception of value emphasized through the act of selecting and collecting? In the context of institutional art collections it would appear that artwork thus left out of authoritative collections must therefore be less valuable. And since work by women artists does less to reinforce masculine identities it is deemed less valuable, less likely to be collected within this context, and therefore less likely to be presented to a broad audience who may be able to make a determination of value for themselves. It is a vicious cycle.

iv. Quality vs. Equality

Gayle Davis highlights the disparity resulting from gendered collecting practices in her essay "Gender and Creative Production: A Social History Lesson in Art Evaluation," emphasizing that, "[t]hus, curators and critics are extraordinarily influential arbiters of taste in art. Occasional defensive statements touting their personal emphasis on 'quality' and not on 'equality' seem irrefutable to a citizenry that believes good art automatically rises to recognition."¹⁵ The assumption that good art automatically rises to recognition recalls Nochlin's exposure of the myth of the Great Artist, and denies both the work required in the production of collection-worthy art as well as a recognition of the gendered biases that inform its valuation. Davis calls out the 1985 Carnegie Museum's International Contemporary exhibition, which included only 4 women out of 42 artists. When asked about this disproportion, "the museum responded that they were looking for quality, not gender, and they were not responsible for correcting discrimination."¹⁶

¹⁵ Gayle R. Davis, "Gender and Creative Production: A Social History Lesson in Art Evaluation," in *The Material Culture of Gender-The Gender of Material Culture*, 1997, 55.

¹⁶ Davis, 63.

The Guerilla Girls, an anonymous collective of women artists, has made a practice of exposing the biases faced by women artists and artists of color within institutional contexts. The group was initially formed as a demonstration in response to the Museum of Modern Art's 1984 exhibition *An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture*, heralded by the museum as a, "survey of the most significant contemporary art in the world."¹⁷ Of the 148 artists featured in the exhibition, only 13 were women (with no artists of color represented). Other projects have revealed, for example, that only 5% of artworks on major museum walls are by women artists.¹⁸ Their 1989 project, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" provides the startling statistic that less than 5% of the artists in Modern Art sections of the Metropolitan Museum of art are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.¹⁹ Nochlin's "Question of the Nude" seems particularly relevant to this statistic as it emphasizes the historic lack of access women have had to the training required in order to produce this ultimate collection-worthy form. And while there is nothing inherently distasteful or wrong with depictions of the female body, the disproportion of representation to those producing the representation places a particular value in society's perception of women and women artists. Asking provocative questions like "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" has resulted in an increased awareness of the disparity between men and women artists included within institutional art collections.

¹⁷ "Guerrilla Girls Archive (Getty Research Institute)," accessed February 10, 2018, http://www.getty.edu/research/special_collections/notable/guerrilla_girls.html.

¹⁸ Guerrilla Girls, "Get the Facts."

¹⁹ Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?*, 1989, poster, 1989.

v. Great Women's Art Collections

Some collectors and institutions have been actively working in recent years to address the imbalance of women artists within institutional art collections. Collectors Valeria Napoleone and Linda Lee Alter have both contributed substantially to raising the visibility and value of women artists within society. Looking to their collecting practices as case studies, these women collectors provide an example for how institutions can take greater responsibility for assigning value and including the work of women artists.

Valeria Napoleone and the Valeria Napoleone XX Initiatives

Valeria Napoleone grew up in Italy where her family home was filled with antique decorative objects.²⁰ After moving to New York to attend NYU, Napoleone became engaged with the city's art scene, ultimately pursuing a Master's degree in Art Administration from the Fashion Institute of Technology.²¹ From this insider's perspective in the robust New York art scene of the 1990s she began collecting art focusing solely on women artists because she wanted to support work by artists she felt were being overlooked only because of their identification as women. Napoleone has explained that, "[s]ince the very first work I bought I knew I was going to build a collection focused on women artists.... My decision was not a strategy, it was a natural inclination and appetite for what I believed were great practices."²² She elaborates that, "I could not understand why these relevant practices were not acknowledged and celebrated."²³ Her collecting focus is primarily on lesser-known,

²⁰ Richard O'Mahony, "The Gentlewoman – Valeria Napoleone," accessed March 17, 2018, <http://thegentlewoman.co.uk/reader-of-the-month/valeria-napoleone>.

²¹ Emma Bryning, "Valeria Napoleone and the All-Female Art Collection," Girl Museum, February 13, 2017, accessed March 17, 2018, <https://www.girlmuseum.org/valeria-napoleone-and-the-all-female-art-collection/>.

²² Carol Civre, "Valeria Napoleone's Collection on View," artnet News, July 7, 2016, accessed March 17, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/valeria-napoleone-going-public-544289>.

²³ Civre.

emerging and mid-career artists,²⁴ providing necessary market support as well as a platform through the renown of her collection for greater visibility. Despite the critically praised collection she has cultivated, a recent interview with Napoleone for *The Gentlewoman* illustrates ongoing biases toward women artists:

[Richard O'Mahony]: Isn't that limiting though? Don't you ever feel like, "Oh, I would *love* to buy that piece by a male artist"?

[Valeria Napoleone]: No, not ever. It's a collection that reflects my personal taste, it's what attracts me, what I believe is good. I want it to be the best.²⁵

It hardly needs to be noted that if Napoleone happened to be collecting work by male artists, such a question would seem far less relevant. While the existence of a collection such as Napoleone's proves that progress has been made since Nochlin's essay first appeared, questions such as those posed in *The Gentlewoman* interview prove as well that the value placed on work by women artists continues to lag as a result of the rhetoric defining collection-worthy work that has changed little since that time.

In a further attempt to promote the work of women artists and to provide a space for them within institutional collections, Napoleone founded the Valeria Napoleone XX initiatives in 2015. With Valeria Napoleone XX Contemporary Art Society (VNXXCAS), Napoleone has pledged to purchase and donate one work of art per year by a woman artist through the Contemporary Art Society in the UK. The Contemporary Art Society "exists to encourage an appreciation and understanding of contemporary art by a wide audience and to donate works by important and new artists to museums and public galleries across the UK."²⁶ In a statement on their website dedicated to the initiative, the Contemporary Art

²⁴ Francesco Dama, "Collector Valeria Napoleone on the Need to Support Women Artists," Hyperallergic, February 27, 2017, accessed March 16, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/354720/collector-valeria-napoleone-on-the-need-to-support-women-artists/>.

²⁵ O'Mahony, "The Gentlewoman – Valeria Napoleone."

²⁶ Contemporary Art Society, "About Us," Contemporary Art Society, accessed March 22, 2018, <http://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/about/>.

Society explains that the initiative is intended, “to provoke an examination of collecting practice that has a wider impact beyond the acquisition of the awarded work and act as a focal point for debate on gender imbalance in museum collections.”²⁷ The ultimate result of VNXXCAS may prove to produce a more open and inclusive rhetoric and criteria for evaluating collection-worthy art and artists.

Valeria Napoleone XX SculptureCenter partners with the New York non-profit museum to commission one work by a female artist every 12-18 months.²⁸ The first commission, completed in 2015, sponsored work by UK artist Anthea Hamilton. The work she created through Napoleone's initiative garnered the attention of the Turner Prize nominating committee. The Turner Prize is a coveted artist award given each year to a British artist.²⁹ To date, 75% of Turner Prize recipients have been male artists.³⁰ In 2016, as a result of the funding for her work and visibility provided by the Valeria Napoleone XX SculptureCenter platform, Anthea Hamilton became the first black woman artist to receive the Turner Prize.

Linda Lee Altar Gift to Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art

Linda Lee Alter, herself an artist, began collecting in the 1980s with the intention of donating the work as a collection to an institution in order to elevate the visibility of women artists and

²⁷ Marcus Crofton, “Major Work by LA-Based Artist Martine Syms to Be Gifted to Leeds Art Gallery through VNXXCAS Scheme,” Contemporary Art Society, April 20, 2017, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/news/cas-news/major-work-la-based-artist-martine-syms-gifted-leeds-art-gallery-vnxxcas-scheme/>.

²⁸ Alex Greenberger, “Valeria Napoleone XX to Bring Work by Female Artists to SculptureCenter, UK Museums,” *ARTnews* (blog), June 11, 2015, accessed March 17, 2018, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/06/11/valeria-napoleone-xx-to-bring-work-by-female-artists-to-sculpturecenter-uk-museums/>.

²⁹ Tate, “The Turner Prize,” Tate, accessed March 23, 2018, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/turner-prize>.

³⁰ Gallery Tally, “Poster for Turner Prize Winners by Micol Hebron, 2017,” A call for gender equity in the arts, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://gallerytally.tumblr.com/post/168199954397/poster-for-turner-prize-winners-by-micol-hebron>.

broaden access to their work. In discussing how she began conceiving of her collection of women artists, Alter states,

It wasn't that I didn't want to collect work by men—it was just that this made me realize that women's art was really not visible. It probably was in some galleries, but often in the back rooms, and I remember that there wasn't a lot to choose from when I started visiting galleries. I felt like I had sort of fallen down on the job because here I was—a woman artist—and I hadn't really paid attention to the visibility of women artists and whether they were being brought to my attention or shown out in front.³¹

Alter's collection takes a broad approach, including work by women artists who practice in a variety of styles and media. Alter explains that,

“it was my goal to have a collection that was broad and not narrow. That it could show a wide range. To show some range of art by women and that it wasn't limited, like mothers and children or flowers. Although some powerful portraits of mothers and children, and flowers, are in it.”³²

This broad approach to collecting demonstrates the kind of mastery that Belk and Wallendorf identify as masculine in nature—exemplifying a kind of control over a vast territory of creative production. In taking such comprehensive approach, Alter's collection contains within itself a challenge to traditionally gendered objects. While including depictions of forms like mothers, children and flowers—what have long been deemed acceptable subject matter for female artists by virtue of proximity—the inclusion of abstract works and works in various media illustrate the progress that has been made by women artists in breaking barriers to access and inclusion.

After 25 years of collecting, Alter decided the time had come to seek out an institutional home for her collection. As a native of Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) was on her shortlist of institutions to approach. Based on PAFA's

³¹ Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Linda Lee Alter and Robert Cozzolino, “‘I Want the Artist to Be Visible’: A Conversation with Linda Lee Alter,” in *The Female Gaze: Women Artists Making Their World*, ed. Robert Cozzolino (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2012), 17-18.

³² Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Alter and Cozzolino, 19.

history of inclusionary efforts and mission to continue pursuing an inclusive approach, PAFA was ultimately determined to be the right fit to steward Alter's collection and vision. The donation was made final in 2010, with more than 500 objects transferred to PAFA's care. In 2012 the collection debuted to PAFA's audiences in *The Female Gaze*, an exhibition comprised of work solely from Alter's collection. Selections from the collection subsequently remain on view at all times within PAFA's galleries.³³

vi. Market

In discussing their collecting practices, both Valeria Napoleone and Linda Lee Alter have noted that collecting works solely by women artists requires extra work on their part to seek out and form relationships with artists who are less represented on the commercial art market. Art galleries are often the first places outside of school that artists are given the opportunity to show work, and collecting institutions like museums rely on these spaces not only as sources for procurement but as sources of knowledge for what and who is relevant to society at any given moment. Commercial art galleries are therefore extremely important gatekeepers, allowing access to or keeping access from artists who will go on to be represented within institutional collections.

Following the practices first applied by the Guerrilla Girls, Gallery Tally is an organization that tracks disparities in market availability of work by women artist in relationship to their male counterparts. Creating visually engaging posters to illustrate statistics gathered, Gallery Tally calls out the representation of artists within galleries of all sizes throughout the international art market. Statistics are made plain through Gallery

³³ Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, "Linda Lee Alter Collection of Art by Women | PAFA - Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts," Linda Lee Alter Collection of Art by Women, accessed March 20, 2018, <https://www.pafa.org/linda-lee-alter-collection-art-women>.

Tally's efforts, and their visually engaging form, published on the web and social media, allows the organization to participate in the quick moving conversations surrounding contemporary social justice issues. To cite just one example, Hauser & Wirth, a large international gallery, is noted by Gallery Tally as having a 66% to 34% ratio of male to female artists represented on their roster.³⁴

Gallery Artist Reform, a similar organization looking to expose gendered bias within the art market, released a study of statistics examining the artist rosters of exhibiting galleries at the 2018 Art Los Angeles Contemporary art fair—a major commercial platform for individual and institutional collectors to purchase and gauge what's new and exciting in artistic production in Los Angeles. Gallery Artist Reform found that among the 1248 artists exhibited by 57 galleries at the fair, 835 were men while 418 were women or non-identifying individuals, a 66% male to 44% female/non-identifying ratio.³⁵ For collectors, that means that more than 6 out of every 10 artists whose work is available for purchase and inclusion is still made by male artists.

vii. Current Moment Case Study: Los Angeles

While not an explicit platform for collecting, the museum biennial provides exposure and increased value by way of association via institutional validation. *Made in L.A.*, Los Angeles' biennial exhibition produced by the Hammer Museum provides a brief case study in the inclusion of women artists within an institutional context, and a look to possible solutions of maintaining equitable visibility of work made by men and women artists. *Made in L.A.*'s first

³⁴ Gallery Tally, "Poster for Hauser & Wirth by Jackson Gathard," accessed March 12, 2018, <http://gallerytally.tumblr.com/image/170050685107>.

³⁵ Gallery Artist Reform, Los Angeles, "2018 Art Los Angeles Contemporary Fair Exhibitors," January 24, 2018.

iteration took place in 2012 and has occurred regularly since then, with the 2018 edition slated for opening this summer.

Examining the gendered composition of curatorial teams overseeing each exhibition provides a quick yet illuminating look at how this administrative framework or curatorial oversight produces similarly configured exhibition roster ratios. The 2012 *Made in L.A.* was jointly curated by staff from the Hammer Museum's own curatorial team along with curatorial staff from LAXART, a local non-profit art space. Anne Ellegood, the Hammer's senior curator, along with Ali Subotnick also from the Hammer, collaborated with LAXART's founder/director Lauri Firstenberg, senior curator Cesar Garcia, and adjunct curator Malik Gaines. This composition of 3 female curators to 2 male curators contributed to a fairly equal representation of women and men artists, with a roughly 49% to 51% female to male ratio. In 2014 *Made in L.A.* was curated by the Hammer's chief curator Connie Butler, along with independent curator Michael Ned Holte. This equal division of female to male curatorial oversight resulted in a 49% to 51% ratio of female to male artists. The following iteration of *Made in L.A.* was overseen by 2 male curators—Aram Moshayedi, curator at the Hammer, and Hamza Walker from Chicago's Renaissance Society (now director of LAXART). This shift in curatorial administration led to a noticeable shift in the ratio of women artists represented—40% women artists to 60% men artists. This year's upcoming edition of the biennial sees yet another significant shift—curated by Anne Ellegood and Erin Christovale, 2 women curators from the Hammer's staff, *Made in L.A.* 2018 will feature a 66% to 34% women to men artist ratio.³⁶

Many of Los Angeles' museums have been aware of "The Woman Problem," and though these collecting institutions are far from remedying the problem they have made

³⁶ All statistics gathered on artist ratios from *Made in L.A.* compiled by the author

active strides to create opportunities for women artists. As is often the case in any form of progress, two steps forward require one step back. The news of the week in the Los Angeles art world, as of the writing of this paper, saw the firing of the Museum of Contemporary Art's (MOCA) chief curator Helen Molesworth. By way of explanation for this abrupt shake-up, the museum's director Phillipe Vergne noted that Molesworth had parted ways from the museum because of "creative differences," although reports from members of MOCA's board insist they had been told Molesworth was let go for "undermining the museum."³⁷ Several high profile women curators from throughout the art world with track records of championing work by women artists and artists of color, like Molesworth, have recently been let go. While Molesworth allegedly "undermined the museum," curator Laura Raicovich from the Queens Museum in New York parted ways from that institution, the museum citing that she was "too political," and the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Bordeaux, María Inéz Rodríguez, was forced out of her post for being "too demanding."³⁸ The same qualities embodied by male professionals are more often seen as maverick attitudes, allowing challenging work to break barriers.

These departures reveal that "The Woman Problem" exists at all levels within collecting institutions. In the case of MOCA, the struggle to deal with "The Woman Problem" from an administrative perspective has played out through its curatorial programming. Vergne has curated several shows since his tenure as the museum's director began in 2014, an unusual move from a position that oversees creative decisions by curatorial staff but rarely takes on this task. The exhibitions organized by Vergne have been solo shows for

³⁷ Christopher Knight, "MOCA Fires Its Chief Curator," *latimes.com*, accessed March 17, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-moca-fires-molesworth-vergne-20180313-story.html>.

³⁸ Priscilla Frank, "The Museum World Is Having An Identity Crisis, And Firing Powerful Women Won't Help," *Huffington Post*, March 15, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/helen-molesworth-moca-fired_us_5aa951fae4b0600b82ff60b5.

artists Doug Aitken, Matthew Barney and Carl Andre—all white, male artists. Molesworth's exhibition history with the institution has been far more diverse, the most recent show she organized before her departure being a solo exhibition for Brazilian woman artist Ana Maria Maolino. Taking this recent situation into consideration along with the *Made in L.A.* case study examined above, it appears that the simplest solution to "The Woman Problem" within collecting institutions—diversifying curatorial and administrative staff—is also among the most challenging given attitudes that remain biased towards women.

viii. Conclusion

In tracing the history of the reasons for why there have been no great women artists as Linda Nochlin pointed out in 1971, almost 50 years ago as of this writing, it is hoped that by calling attention to the biases that have proliferated and allowed women artists to be kept away from equitable representation within institutional art collections, some solutions for progressing toward this goal may be made clear. The trope of asking provocative questions and making plain the bias toward male artists through statistics as Nochlin, the Guerrilla Girls, Gallery Tally and Gallery Artist Reform have done, holds collecting institutions and the commercial supply chain leading to acquisition of work accountable. Understanding the rhetoric and qualifications that define how society perceives artistic genius and quality, and finding new ways of assessing these values is another solution. It was announced the same week of completing this writing that artist Amy Sberald, who recently completed a commission for the portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama for the National Portrait Gallery, would be represented by international commercial gallery Hauser & Wirth. As Gallery Tally pointed out, Hauser & Wirth has a 66% to 34% ratio of male to female artists on their roster. The inclusion of Sberald will help to tip these scales toward a more equal distribution. In commenting on the news, gallery partner and vice president Marc Payot noted that he

‘...was blown away by what I saw on that first [studio] visit—an art completely unique in its expression, within a genre that could not be more classical. Her paintings are very personal and yet universal at the same time,’ and they have an ‘incredible strength that I can’t really contain in words.’ He continued, ‘I have never seen portraits painted like this. I believe the singularity of Amy’s approach is in itself a major achievement.’³⁹

The rhetoric used by Payot in describing Sherald’s work echoes the myth of the Great Artist as Nochlin described it, as well as the value placed on traditional forms of representation that were historically denied women artists. While the inclusion of Sherald in such a high-profile commercial art program demonstrates progress, the language used and attitude towards her work plays into the denial of art as a creative product that is produced through structures historically denied to women in favor of the idea of inevitable artistic genius that has traditionally placed more value on art made by men. One final proposed solution is to provide more opportunities for women curators and administrators—a seemingly simple solution to incorporating the work of women artists on a larger scale within institutional collections, though one that has been demonstrated in the current moment to continue to be a struggle not only for collecting institutions but in the broader cultural conversation of women in the professional workforce. Taking on any of these approaches as solutions to “The Woman Problem” should contribute to making the question posed by this paper, “Why have there been no great women’s art collections?” ultimately less relevant.

³⁹ Alex Greenberger, “Michelle Obama Portraitist Amy Sherald to Be Represented by Hauser & Wirth,” *ARTnews* (blog), March 20, 2018, <http://www.artnews.com/2018/03/20/michelle-obama-portraitist-amy-sherald-represented-hauser-wirth/>.

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